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# **Turbulent being(s): Proliferating curses and shamanic practice in post-Soviet Kyzyl, Tuva**

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## **Thesis Abstract**

This thesis is about curses. It shows how the mechanics of cursing are intrinsically linked to shamanic practice in the ethnographic context of social, economic and political shifts in post-Soviet Kyzyl, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Tuva. Moving beyond discourses that understand ‘economics’ as narrowly pertaining to wealth, power and the circulation of goods, the thesis explores curses as distinct social mechanisms within an ‘occult economy’ that constitutes a wider sociocosmic politics emergent from human and non-human interactions. Along these lines, while presenting Tuvan shamanism as central to cursing phenomena, the thesis explores the distinctiveness and efficacy of shamanic practice as a form of artistry embedded in instrument-derived (shamanic drum) and human (the shaman’s voice) sound production. Thus, it challenges the ‘classical’ readings of shamanism which emphasise trance and mediumship usually seen as involving significant changes in the ‘physical’ and ‘psychic’ states of the shamans.

Contextualizing cursing in the practice of Tuvan shamanism, the thesis illuminates the significance of sound creation among Tuvans in order to introduce the notion of ‘turbulence’ as integral not only to shamanic sound production, but also to immediate experiences of cursing and the overall patterning of the cosmos. More than that, bringing sounds and turbulence together in the context of shamanic rituals, it shows how sounds are imbued with a potency of their own rather than simply constituting a sonorous aspect of shamanic words. Along these lines, it contributes to a better understanding of im/materiality and the logic of representation. Lastly, exploring the multiplication of curses in the post-Soviet context, the thesis also offers an interpretative framework which unveils how occult phenomena can become efficacious analytical tools, allowing us to grasp the mosaic-like characteristics of the sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded. In this way, the thesis attempts to emancipate ‘occultism’ from the rigid dichotomies of tradition and modernity, and challenge those anthropological approaches to post-colonial transformations which emphasise cultural revivalism and ethnic identity, remaining caught in the usual dynamics of ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ – dynamics we need to leave behind.





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## **Transliteration and names**

**On transliteration:** I have used the following system when transliterating Tuvan terms from the Tuvan' Cyrillic alphabet:

**A (a) Б (b) В (v) Г (g) Д (d) Е (je) Ё (jo) Ж (zj) З (z) И (i) Ы (j) К (k) Л (l) М (m) Н (n) Ң (ng) О (o) Ө (ö) П (p) Р (r) С (s) Т (t) У (u) Y (ü) Ф (f) Х (h) Ц (ts) Ч (ch) Ш(sh) Ъ ('') Ь (y) Ы ('') Э (e) Ю (ju) Я (ja)**

**On names:** Due to the general secrecy surrounding cursing practices, the identity of all of my informants has been protected through the use of pseudonyms. However, the shaman Hovalygmaa is identified, as requested, by her real name in order to maintain the legacy of her and her family's work in the context of the practice and preservation of Tuvan shamanism.



## Introduction

### Shonchalgalj: first encounter

When I first arrived in Kyzyl in early November 2014, my goal was to conduct research focusing on the proliferation of shamanic societies and schools for shamans in post-Soviet Tuva. Given my initial interests, I was quickly classified by some of my informants as one of the many visitors who arrive in the city chasing stories about local shamans and studying the tradition of *khöömei*, the Tuvan art of throat singing. This, in turn, led to a rather frustrating situation, wherein, instead of having the opportunity to ask questions and familiarise myself with the people around me, I was continuously referred to the libraries and academic literature regarding Tuvan and Siberian shamanism. While rethinking my methodological strategies and wandering through the streets, I remained convinced that there was something somehow hidden from me, yet also very present, in the everyday life of the city. Nonetheless, Kyzyl and its people, like the massive layers of ice and snow on the Yenisei river, remained silent and unmoved by my persistent attempts at getting behind the sociocultural scenography, to call it what it felt like, carefully crafted for the outsiders. It was not until a few months later, in early spring, that I was accidentally introduced to the very subject of this thesis.

I had just finished a meeting with the students of English philology at the state university. We talked mostly about the Scottish referendum and Harry Potter. The students expressed their particular interests in the Scots and their ‘fight’ with the English, comparing the political tensions to hidden frictions between Tuvans and Russians. The person who invited me to the meeting was Shonchalgalj, the enthusiastic Head of the English Language Department. She was giving me a ride home and we were discussing my reasons for undertaking research in Tuva. Driven by discreet rumours overheard earlier in the corridors of the university’s building, I asked Shonchalgalj if it was true that people in Tuva cursed each other. She gave me a very confused look. ‘It will be very hard for you to find anything about curse, we are a clean nation you know. The shamans as well, we are ‘clean’ (*aryg*)’, she quickly replied. ‘It

is the Russians, the Uzbeks, and the Tajiks. We do not do such things', she kept on assuring me while I looked at her, unconvinced. At this stage of my fieldwork, I was used to my informants' tendencies not to disclose their thoughts in a straightforward manner. On the contrary, I was warned to expect people to meander around the subject or 'hide' (*bazyrar*) their opinions behind stone cold face expressions. This time, however, events took a different turn. Shonchalgaj suddenly pulled up the car and looked at me. 'Listen, I will tell you my story, but this is something you cannot talk about in Kyzyl'. This was the first time I heard about *kargysh-chatka*, the Tuvan curse.

As we sat in a car parked outside the Tuvan Cultural Centre in the heart of Kyzyl, Shonchalgaj described how a few years earlier she was competing for the position of Head at the aforementioned department. The choice had been narrowed down to her and another female lecturer. Shonchalgaj won, which seemed to trigger a lot of anger in her opponent. When Shonchalgaj came back from holidays, she suddenly fell ill. The doctors struggled to find the cause of her condition; however, after a week, she felt fine again. A year later, around the exact same time, Shonchalgaj suddenly fell into coma. Like before, a few days later she woke up feeling perfectly well. One more year passed, and this time my informant was told she was suffering from leukaemia, only to 'miraculously' improve within a week. Encouraged by her husband, Shonchalgaj met with a representative of a local Buddhist temple, the family lama, who gave her a string with sutras (Buddhist scripture containing religious teachings) to wear as protection. She would always have it while travelling and always remembered to pass it on to her children and husband when they were undertaking any trips to remote places. Despite the lama's help, Shonchalgaj still felt, at times, weak and worried about her family. Eventually, she decided to contact a local shaman. The shaman, Hovalgymaa, agreed to come to Shonchalgaj's office early in the morning before anyone else came to work and could notice them. She instantly informed Shonchalgaj that she was suffering from a powerful curse inflicted by her rival from three years before. The shaman conducted a 'cleansing ritual' (*aryglaashkyn*) and provided Shonchalgaj with a personal token (*eeren*) that she was supposed to always carry with her for protection. Shonchalgaj never had any problems again.

Drawing on 12 months of fieldwork, this thesis provides an ethnographic account of the proliferation of curses in post-Soviet Kyzyl, the capital of the

Autonomous Republic of Tuva. While placing an analytical stress on the socioeconomic and political implications of the Soviet dissolution, without reducing it to them, I attempt to explore the significance of cursing as being central to and intimately related with shamanic practice in Tuva. Through the lens of the mechanics of cursing, each of the following chapters engages with the characteristics of Tuvan shamanising while touching on diverse issues, including the idea of cursed personhood, the role of drums, and the organisation of ritual events as well as the conceptualisation of sounds used in such curse-oriented rituals. Bringing these themes together, the thesis concludes by exploring my informants' understanding of the challenges life presents in post-Soviet Kyzyl and the way they themselves are related to curses.

Twenty years after Soviet disintegration, Kyzyl constitutes a rich platform upon which diverse practices, including cursing and the deflection of curses, flourish while being described as 'magical business' (Rus. *magicheskiye dela*). On the edge of this landscape, in deep secrecy, operate shamans who deal with continuously proliferating instances of curses, *kargysh-chatka* ('gossip, curse').<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon, although intimately associated with Tuvan life before the Soviet regime, has significantly intensified in the wake of the Soviet dissolution. This thesis is concerned with the instances of *kargysh-chatka* infliction and deflection. I approach them as distinct social mechanisms which, while intertwining with the economic and political ramifications of the end of the Soviet regime, also reveal dynamics and tensions embedded in a sociality that involves spirits and humans alike. In this way, I suggest that cursing in Tuva constitutes an instantiation of a wider sociocosmic politics emergent from human and non-human interactions.

The process of curse infliction or deflection requires the presence of the shaman and represents a complex procedure, which includes divinatory techniques as well as an aurally elaborated performance. In order to remove or inflict a curse, the shamans have to generate diverse sounds with their own voice, as well as rely on the

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<sup>1</sup> Although, in some respects, cursing may be seen as similar to sorcery or witchcraft, my informants never referred to curses in those terms. Thus, in this thesis, when talking about occult phenomena, such as curse, I refer to the Tuvan expression *kargysh-chatka*, which translates as 'gossip, curse'.

sounds of their drums. Throughout this thesis, I seek to show how Tuvan shamans are central personas in the (un)folding of a sociocosmic drama instantiated and exemplified by the phenomenon of curse. I also attempt to illuminate how the shamans' creative use of sounds transforms them into distinct artisans of cursing, who continuously confront and report on fragile and uneasy cosmic configurations characterised by the conflicts and tensions between humans as well as humans and spirits. More than that, I seek to delineate how sounds in Tuvan shamanic practice are imbued with a potency of their own while remaining independent from the actual words uttered by shamans. As I will discuss further on in this Introduction, these elements have particular implications for the characteristics of Tuvan shamanic practice in general; for instance, the significance of the shamanic drum and the overall efficacy of shamanic work. Thus, this thesis is about the importance of the shaman's voice and the significance of his or her drum – a successful curse-deflection or infliction depend on these sounds.

The idea of sound foreshadows another theme with which this thesis engages. In Tuvan throat singing tradition, the production of sound entails a condition of turbulence (Rus. *turbulentnost*). In the Tuvan language, my informants would express this idea as 'swirls' (*ezinneldir*) and 'whirls' (*duvulendir*). Turbulence (although a different kind) is also central to experiences of cursing. People who suffer from curse infliction are said to become turbulent, while their human personhood is abruptly pervaded by swirls and whirls. The condition of turbulence remains equally crucial to the organisation of events during shamanic rituals dedicated to cursing and curse-deflection. It also constitutes one of the ideas with which my informants described diverse challenges of life in post-Soviet Kyzyl. Thus, over the course of this thesis I show how turbulence represents one of the key concepts permeating Tuvan imagery and revealing the characteristics of diverse aspects of life in Tuva.

In the next sections, I delineate how these arguments can be developed in and through a number of particular themes both ethnographic and more theoretical. Firstly, I focus on the ethnographic context of Tuva. Thereafter, I explore some of the relevant anthropological literature. Lastly, I reflect on the methodological tools I employed in my research and explore some of the ways in which they have shaped my argument.



## Curses and Shamans

Due to its geographical location, Tuva constitutes a rather unusual place in comparison to other indigenous territories in Siberia. Given its remoteness and difficult access through steep mountains, the Tuvans were somehow left on the edge of the process of Sovietisation, which enabled them to partially resist outside influences (Humphrey and Sneath 1999: 73). On the one hand, unlike other indigenous Siberian communities, they have managed to preserve their native language, numerous practices – such as throat singing – and certain rituals, as well as avoid the dispersion of the population (Forsyth 1992; Pimienova 2013). On the other hand, the process of Russification which dominated the life of other indigenous communities (Grant 1995), in Tuva was never fully successful. Instead, as suggested by many of my informants, Tuvans have continued to balance elements of Sovietisation with Tuvan practices, and the problems characteristic of life in the post-Soviet realm. More than that, strong echoes of the Soviet regime, along with the challenges presented by the emergence of the free market economy and a number of new political arrangements, have created an atmosphere of deep anxiety and unpredictability characterised by continuous dependency on other, more influential or powerful, people and their decisions.

Within this landscape of uncertainty, curses and the fear of being cursed, although mostly hidden from outsiders, have greatly proliferated. As I was told, before the arrival of the Soviets, *kargysh-chatka* was suspected only in cases of theft and murder. During Soviet times, the practice of cursing continued; however, due to shamanic persecutions and the overall danger associated with performing such practices, there is scarcely any data available that can contribute to a better understanding of what was happening at that time. In the post-Soviet era, however, things have dramatically changed. Today, in flats, houses, and offices, people engage in cursing and inflicting *kargysh-chatka* while seeking revenge, attempting to secure job positions, or channelling their anxieties and jealousy, on a regular basis. Sudden success, a new car, a potential quarrel with the wife's relatives or neighbours, as well as daily interactions in the working environment constantly generate the possibility of inflicting curses, leading to an almost omnipresent fear of curses in the city.

Additionally, the possible presence of clan curses (with which I briefly engage in Chapter One), characterised by their potency to last for over seven generations, leave little to no chance that people in Kyzyl could live their life without being affected by curse.

Although cursing is associated with people's direct intentions (in the form of thoughts and words) to harm, it is only shamans who have the ability to inflict or deflect them. This is due to the fact that curses, perceived as energies (*kyshter*), are delivered and removed by particular spirits with which only shamans have the expertise to negotiate successfully. While inflicting a curse, the spirits trigger a condition of turbulence in which the victim remains until the curse is deflected. As people in Tuva are said to be constructed from multiple layers held together by their centre – 'soul' (*sünezin*), in the presence of a curse all of these layers begin to tremble, transforming people into turbulent beings. The efficacy of the ritual (concerned with either infliction or deflection of the curse) remains contingent on a proper articulation of sounds, which either please, irritate, or manipulate the spirits – it is this articulation, the mastery of the right sounds, that is seen as pertaining exclusively to shamans.

Thus, this thesis is about curses and shamans. It is about the way in which the proliferation of curses foregrounds the significance of shamanic practice and provides me with the opportunity to grasp my informants' lives in the unpredictable and 'chaotic' context of Post-Soviet Kyzyl in a way that does justice to their fears and hopes. In the following section, in order to contextualise this proliferation of curses as well as establish the ground of the theoretical themes through which I approach it, I present a brief historical background of Tuva as well as describe the site of my fieldwork, Kyzyl.

### **Historical and field landscape**

The Republic of Tuva lies in the center of Asia and shares its borders with Mongolia and a number of subdivisions of Russia: Buryatia, Altai Republic, Khakassia, Russia and Krasnoyarsk Krai. It constitutes a group of high valleys at the headquarters of the Yenisei river. Tuva is cut off on all sides from Siberia and North-

west Mongolia by steep mountains. The Tuvans (also known as *Tyvans*, *Tannu-Tuvans*, *Soyots* or *Uryankhays*) are descendants of the Turkic peoples who inhabited Siberia and vast areas of Asia at the beginning of the first century AD (Haywood 2010, Forsyth 1992). The Tuvan language is a part of the Turkic group of the Altai language family which includes Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Koreanic, and Japonic languages (Menges 1968).

The first historical references to the current geographical territory of Tuva go back to the seventh century BC, and described Iranian speaking Scythians inhabiting this area (Haywood 2010: 2). From the second century BC up to early AD, the lands of modern Tuva were occupied by the Hunnic Empire. The first semi-nomadic forms of existence were developed during this period (Vainshtein 1981: 40). The second half of the first millennium AD marked the arrival of the ancient Turkic tribes on Tuvan territories (ibid.). The northeastern mountain taiga regions were then simultaneously inhabited by the Siberian Samoyeds and Kets tribes (Forsyth 1992: 21). The sixth century brought the establishment of the principal features of nomadic pastoralism which involved the use of yurts as the chief form of dwelling, a specialised herding economy, and distinctive types of clothing and food (Vainshtein 1981: 40). In 1207, the territories of Tuva were conquered by the Mongol armies which led to integration with a number of Mongol tribes. By the eighteenth century, Tuvans were culturally Turkicised and became an ethnically integrated whole (Forsyth 1992: 21). The current population of Tuva resembles a mosaic of various ethnic origins – principally Turkic, Mongol, Samoyed, and Ket (ibid.: 43).

The ethnonym *Tuva* was connected, for the first time, with the Turkic-speaking Uigur group and established among the Sayan-Altai people in the first millennium AD (Vainshtein 1981: 43). With time, this name was adopted by all groups no matter their origins (ibid.). In the eighteenth century, Tuva was taken over by the Manchu or Ch'ing Empire (ibid.: 42). Simultaneously, under the rule of Peter the Great, Russia started to express their interest in the mineral wealth of the Altai (Forsyth 1992: 226). In 1911, after the collapse of the Manchu dynasty, Tuva, known as Uryankhai krai by the Russians at the time, became a Russian protectorate. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution in 1917 and after the Tuvan people's revolution in 1921, the Tuvans established the Tuvan People's Republic-Tannu-Tuva with Kyzyl as its capital

(Vainshtein 1981: 43). The Russians maintained their political and mercantile interest in Tuva and retained it as a Soviet satellite. In 1944, much later than any other indigenous group, the Tuvans were finally incorporated into the Soviet Union (Mongush 2006: 276). After the collapse of the USSR, Tuva has remained a part of the Russian Federation in the form of a Republic (ibid.). In 1993, the Tuvans adopted their own constitution, which declares their political status as a 'sovereign democratic state in the Russian Federation' with its own anthem and its own flag (ibid.).

Despite significant Soviet influences, Tuva still represents a unique area where three key economic systems of Central and Inner Asia meet (Humphrey 1981: 1), although on a much smaller scale. These are; a reindeer-herding and hunting economy in the mountainous forest zones; a small-scale cattle and horse-herding and hunting economy in the taiga-steppe zone; and a complex steppe pastoralism with different kinds of herds in the dry upland steppes of the south and east (Vainshtein 1981: 49). Before Sovietisation, Tuvan society was divided into clans, something which had particular implications for the economic system. Members of each clan were strictly exogamous, sharing particular economic relations arising from membership in a particular clan – for example, clan territories – and gathering to offer prayers to the spirit owners of the mountains for successful hunting and for the good health of the clan (ibid.: 238). Simultaneously, of high importance were patronymic groups, that is, groups of nuclear or extended families (ibid.: 257). The members of each patronymic group lived in dispersed *aal* communities – a number of households migrating together (ibid.: 423). Each *aal* had equal land holding rights and conducted communal tasks on the basis of working in turns and moving back and forth across the territory (ibid.). The communal element was always an important aspect of the social and economic life of nomadic peoples, and the Tuvans retained their nomadic communities up until the 1950s (ibid.: 242). In the process of Sovietisation, the nomads' pasturing places were transformed into collective farm-settlements. The introduction of collective institutions of *sovkhos* (state farm) and *kolkhos* (collective farm) transformed the Tuvans' lands into large scale agricultural enterprises with hundreds of members, controlled by the local government (Humphrey and Sneath 1999: 78-79). Sovietisation included further permanent settlement of nomads, universal education, and creation of urban centres, such as, Chadaan, Turan and, built in 1921, the capital Kyzyl. As I will

propose in this thesis, spatial shifts, generated by the move from the steppe to the city, resulted in shifts in social proximity, leading to the escalation of tensions and conflicts that were always there, but only fully revealed themselves in the post-Soviet realm, resulting in a significant increase in the instances of cursing. The establishment of the urban setting and its further transformations under changing political systems have equally had direct implications for the shifts within the shamanic landscape and perceptions of shamanic work.

Prior to the Soviet Union, shamanic practice, as opposed to Buddhist ceremonies, was somewhat private and conducted only for the shaman's closest neighbours and relatives (Pimienova 2013: 122). Shamans functioned on the outskirts of the community, subsisting on herding and hunting in the same manner as the other members of the group, whilst only using their skills on demand (*ibid.*). During the Soviet period, one of the fundamental goals of the new regime was the renouncement of the superstitions of tribal religion in favour of the 'scientific ideology' of Marxism-Leninism (Forsyth 1992: 287). Consequently, during the 1920s, all shamanic practices in Siberia, which were immediately characterised as religion, were banned. In Tuva, however, the status of shamanism was quite unclear. Due to the relative lack of an obviously collective dimension in shamanic rituals, the Tuvan shamans were mostly outside the scope of interest of the Soviet authorities (Pimienova 2013: 123). There was no organised milieu, such as a clergy, which made it difficult for the Soviets to persecute shamans and easier to eradicate Buddhist practitioners who always worked and trained collectively (*ibid.*). Consequently, shamanism in Tuva managed to maintain its form as a discreet practice, difficult to target for 'antireligious' policies. Until the 1990s, it avoided being the object of close attention from the authorities and survived the Soviet regime on the margins of society (*ibid.*).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the status of Tuvan shamanism shifted significantly, and, as among other indigenous communities, it quickly became a political tool in the attempts at re-establishing political and ethnic autonomy (Pimenova 2013; Lindquist 2005). Simultaneously, as I was told by my informants, the extremely challenging living conditions in Kyzyl, which unfolded after the end of the Soviet Union, triggered a strong demand for shamanic assistance; this ultimately led to their concentration in the capital. In 1995, shamanism was recognised, along

with Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity, as a ‘traditional confession’ (Pimenova 2013: 129) which led to the establishment of numerous schools and societies for shamans. This process, although successful in the international arena, failed within the context of everyday life, triggering uncertainty and doubt around the status of shamanic practice in the new economic and political system. Soon after the establishment of the societies, the shamans divided themselves into those affiliated with the organisations and the independents, the latter since operating in an almost underground kind of secrecy. Within this diversified landscape, tensions between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ (mostly associated with the societies) shamans ensued. In the context of the latter, the threat of curse has become a useful business tool, allowing ‘charlatans’ to lie to their clients and make more money – a practice highly condemned by Kyzylians. Thus, the reputation of shamans and the efficiency of their work have been, to a certain extent, dependent on their ability to quickly and permanently remove curses, which closely intertwines with the way they perform, i.e. how they use the drum and their bodies, if they sing accurately and long enough, if they request any money in return, and so on. Taken together, contemporary Tuvan shamanism constitutes a complex multilevel phenomenon intimately intertwined with diverse political and socioeconomic processes while remaining central to cursing practices. Having started with a brief historical and geographical background of Tuva, I shall provide a short overview of the field site where I conducted my research; the capital city Kyzyl.

The first view of Tuva is encountered over the top of a mountain, when an enormous space of scattered hills suddenly opens up to reveal a long straight road leading to the capital. Kyzyl emerges abruptly from behind a hill when a taxi or a bus takes a sharp turn to the west at the end of this road. Each time I saw Kyzyl, I always thought it looked like a space station, an unfinished architectural project left on this distant deserted planet (see Figure 1). In winter, the city, like any urban area in Tuva, is covered in dark clouds of soot. In summer, the streets are scoured by constant sandstorms and winds. The suburbs of the city consist mainly of small wooden houses, whereas the city centre is distinguished by numerous grey blocks of flats, often accompanied by fields of metal garages and massive electricity pylons and cables hovering over the city. The heart of Kyzyl includes a neat modern shopping mall with a sign in English reading “I love Tuva”. A university building, a cultural centre, and

numerous government establishments are also found in the vicinity of the main square. Nearby is a park boasting the Centre of Asia monument, a few hotels, and a coffee shop catering mainly to tourists from Russia.



**Figure 1.** A fragment of Kyzyl in late November, 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Most buildings and roads are marked with endless cracks and deep holes giving the impression that the city is being slowly consumed by the underlying steppe. Younger generations tend to leave Kyzyl to seek education and employment in other Russian cities, such as Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, or Irkutsk. Those who decide to stay often stress the importance of family ties, as it is mainly through kin that one obtains some financial stability and general support in Tuva. Life in Kyzyl, as a majority of my informants stressed, is challenging in many respects and often remains hard to understand for outsiders. During my stay in Kyzyl, I lived in one of the blocks of flats situated in the very centre of the city, while sharing a two-bedroom apartment with a retired widow who kindly opened the doors of her household to me. Initially, I spent most of my days working at the local state university, where I provided English language lessons. After I established more contacts, I began to regularly follow a local family of shamans, in particular, shaman Hovalygmaa, who shared with me her

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<sup>2</sup> All of the photographs presented in this thesis were taken by the author.

extensive knowledge of shamanic practice and curses as well as introduced me to her wide network of clients. I also spent a significant amount of my time at the Tuvan Cultural Centre, where I learned, among other things, about the Tuvan music traditions. Given the fact that most of my informants, including the family of the shamans, lived within a close distance of my flat as well as the university and the Cultural Centre, my fieldwork revolved primarily around three main streets in Kyzyl, where I passed the time investigating instances of cursing and learning about my informants' daily existence. Apart from the family of shamans, most of my interviewees whose stories, observations, and knowledge I share in this thesis, although it is difficult to generalise, came from diverse backgrounds, and include local vendors, accountants, secretaries, policemen, sportsmen, journalists, musicians, political and government figures, petty criminals, teachers, and lecturers as well as students from the state university. They are mostly of the generation born and brought up during or right after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

Kyzyl constitutes a captivating ethnographic context in which to investigate the mechanics of cursing and the way they are interwoven with shamanic practice. More than that, it provides a challenging opportunity to think about shamanism and cursing as well as Tuvan life in the context of apparent change and dis/continuity problematizing the way anthropologists tend to rely on a link between post-colonial realms and 'modernity' – a link often treated as intrinsic. In order to foreground this challenge, in the next section I engage with the anthropological literature on shamanic practice, witchcraft and post-Soviet Siberia whilst simultaneously situating my analysis within it.

## **Analytical background**

This thesis seeks to draw on a rich body of anthropological literature dedicated to the notions of occult phenomena, in particular curse and 'dark shamanism' (Whitehead and Wright 2004), which dispels their perceptions as 'traditional' or 'premodern' concepts while providing ethnographic accounts from Africa (see, for example, Geshiere 1997, 1998, 2013; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Smith 2008; Ashforth 2005; West 2001; Niehaus 2005; Moore and Sanders 2001), Melanesia



(Schram 2010), Indonesia (Bubandt 2014), Amazonia (see, among other, Hugh-Jones 1996; Fausto 2004; Whitehead and Wright 2004; Vidal and Whitehead 2004) and Mongolia (Swancutt 2012; Pedersen 2011; Empson 2011; High 2007/2008; Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Højer 2004, Humphrey 2012; Delaplace 2014). Within this literature, occult practices occupy a critical position in anthropological discussions that concentrate on analysing ‘modern’ political, economic, and social forms in post-colonial realms while emphasising the notions of global capitalism and wealth (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; West 2001; Schram 2010), politics and power (Geshiere 1997, 1998; Vidal and Whitehead 2004; Wright 2004; Ashforth 2005), doubt and uncertainty (Buyandelegrin 2007; Bubandt 2014), ontological transition (Pedersen 2011), inventiveness (Swancutt 2006, 2008, 2012), urban sociality (Delaplace 2014; Højer 2004), and cultural revivalism (Balzer 2002, 2005, 2008; Vitebsky 2003; Grant 1995). This thesis seeks to contribute to these ongoing discussions by contrasting them with the ethnographic context of the lived experiences of curse and shamanic practice in Kyzyl.

In Kyzyl, the increasing instances of *kargysh-chatka* deeply permeate the economic and political spheres, often being associated with direct expressions of jealousy and revenge. Cursing practices are also a part of the wider network of services offered by diverse ‘spiritual’ practitioners in Kyzyl, described as ‘magical business’ (Rus. *magicheskije dela*). In this way, curse infliction and deflection rituals may become career driving tools, especially for ‘fake’ shamans seeking quick financial fortune. Thus, *kargysh-chatka* echoes conceptualisations of occult practices elsewhere, in particular witchcraft, through frameworks like ‘occult economies’ where occultism is directly associated with the inexplicable or suspicious increase of wealth and power (Geshiere 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). One of the main proponents of this perspective, Geshiere, equates witchcraft with subversive and accumulative forces which simultaneously guarantee a surge of wealth and power, but also enable the tackling of inequalities (1997: 5). In a similar fashion, the Comaroffs show how occult practices constitute mystical means to attain material ends in the process of retooling culturally familiar technologies (1999: 284). In this thesis, I seek to move beyond the discourses that understand ‘economics’ as narrowly pertaining to wealth, power and the circulation of goods. Instead, I show how curses in Kyzyl are distinct social

mechanisms within an ‘occult economy’ that constitutes a wider sociocosmic politics that emerge from human and non-human interactions.

In order to frame my challenge, I draw particularly from studies which illuminate the problematic use of the idea of ‘modernity’ as a sole analytical tool in grasping diverse processes occurring in a post-colonial milieu (Englund 1996: 260; Empson 2011: 304-305). While drawing inspiration from these approaches, I concentrate on the mechanics of cursing in post-Soviet Kyzyl in order to reveal sociocosmic dynamics and tensions which are unveiled or intensified, instead of being triggered or created, by the collapse of the Soviet regime. I also show how this sociocosmic drama is embedded in – but not reducible to – the shifting economic and political landscape. More than that, in line with instrumental (Niehaus 2005) rather than discursive (Geshiere 1997, 1998) approaches to witchcraft, I explore curses as distinct social actions allowing my Tuvan informants to maintain a certain degree of agency and control over their existence (rather than merely acquire monetary and material profits) in an otherwise unpredictable and turbulent world, control which is ultimately sought both by humans and spirits. Thus, I hope to delineate how cursing phenomena ‘bring people to the limits of their understanding of others in regard to themselves’ (Siegel 2006: 10). Engaging with the mechanic of cursing, I illuminate how curses in Tuva are perceived as fluctuating energies that pertain to the wider network of energies that can be exchanged, increased, or tamed. I suggest that this plasticity attests to the wider characteristics of social and cosmic dynamics in Tuva as embedded in perpetual fluctuation and movement – a fluctuation and movement intrinsically related to people’s lives in the cosmos and their understanding of it. To this extent, the argument of my thesis draws inspiration from the broad anthropological studies dedicated to the notion of misfortune and luck in the context of Siberia, approached as meaningful rather than random states of being that can be controlled (see, for example, Humphrey and Ujeed 2012; Broz and Willerslev 2012; Hamayon 2012; Empson 2012).

While mapping out the intricacies of cursing, this thesis explores the characteristics of shamanic practice, in particular, ‘dark shamanism’ (Whitehead and Wright 2004). The conventional frames of anthropological explanations approached shamanic work as a system of psycho-social tensions (Shirokogoroff 1935), as the

archaic origin of all religions (Eliade 1972), as compensation for social insecurities (Lewis 1971), or as a system of exchange between humans and ‘nature’ (Hamayon 1996). These approaches depict shamanism as an ‘it’, something that ‘is’ and therefore can be gathered under an overarching theory. Avoiding an ‘it’ and expanding the idea of flow characteristic of curses, this thesis relies on the studies that grasp occult phenomena, to which ‘dark shamanism’ corresponds, as fluid, ambiguous, and fragmentary (Geshiere 1998; Ashforth 2005; Bubandt 2014). Following on from that, I approach shamanic practice as a form of creative endeavour embedded in the pragmatism of everyday life in Kyzyl, rather than a distinct religious, political, or any other kind ideology. I draw inspiration from literature preoccupied with problematizing ‘shamanism’ as a noun and focusing on what shamans actually do, therefore alluding to the verb ‘shamanising’ (Atkinson 1992; Willerslev 2007; Campbell 1989; Vitebsky 2003; Humphrey 1996a, 1996b).

Within these studies, emphasis is placed upon the plasticity of shamanic practice (Humphrey 1996a: 192) and, thus, the ease with which it adapts to new circumstances (Swancutt 2008: 851) while comparing shamans to chameleons oscillating between the domain of religion and everyday pragmatism (Vitebsky 2003: 278). In short, they stress the fragmented and elusive characteristics of shamanic practice seen more as a recognisable set of ritual activities accompanied by a conglomeration of cosmological ideas, rather than a unified ideology (Humphrey 1996a: 192). Taking these arguments a step further, I also emphasise the fluid-like elements embedded in the process of knowledge production in shamanic practice, exemplified by Tuvans as a particular skill of seeing and hearing what usually cannot be heard or seen (*bürülbaazyn*). Thus, I hope to contribute to the readings of shamanic work as techniques for knowing instead of ‘a system of knowledge or facts known’ (Townesley 1993: 452).

At the same, time, I have set out to illustrate something more than simply the fluid and equivocal aspects of shamanic practice. While drawing on the literature which illuminates the centrality of dark shamanism to shamanic work and cosmological ideas (Whitehead and Wright 2004; Lagrou 2004; Fausto 2004), and defines shamans’ harming and curing capacities as complementary opposites rather than antagonistic possibilities (Whitehead and Wright 2004: 3), I seek to challenge the

perceptions of the terms ‘dark’ and ‘light’ (Wright 2004; Wilbert 2004) or ‘good’ and ‘evil’ (Heckenberger 2004) as moral descriptors. Focusing on the Tuvan differentiation between black (*kara*) and white (*ak*) as well exploring how the term *aza* (‘evil’) is used in relation to spirits, I hope to show, following Pocock (1983), that these terms have ontological rather than moral implications (ibid.: 46). In other words, they do not describe or instantiate what humans and spirits should or should not do, but what humans and spirits are or are not.

By choosing to engage with the ambiguity embedded in shamanic practice, I have also sought out to problematize the perceptions of cosmic configurations as ordered and stable. In line with literature challenging these understandings (Sahlins 1996) through presenting cosmic structures as intrinsically perforated (Pedersen and Willerslev 2010), chaotic (Mikkelsen 2016) and never completed (Townesley 1993), I hope to show how shamanic practice, rather than being primarily about ‘fixing’ the world, is more about continuous reporting on and confronting an intrinsically unstable cosmos while temporarily arranging it in a certain form, for instance, through curse infliction or deflection.

Contextualising cursing in Tuvan shamanic practice, this thesis engages with the notion of cursed personhood as another essential element of the mechanics of cursing. I seek to show how different parts of human personhood (e.g., physicality, emotions, cognition), are brought together in a concentric fashion around one’s *sünezin* (‘soul’); according to my informants, ‘the centre’ of a person. I also hope to illuminate how the notion of curse upsets this pattern by creating turbulence. While problematizing understandings of body and soul as spirit and matter, as well as contrasting human personhood with other types of persons (animals, spirits), I build my discussion on a rich literature dedicated to a fluid intertwining between these notions within animistic ontologies, including Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013; Gow 1992; Hugh Jones 1992; Taylor 1996), Siberia (Ulturgasheva 2016; Pedersen 2001; Swancutt 2012; Humphrey 2007; Willerslev 2007), and Southeast Asia (Arhem 2016a; Errington 1983). I equally rely on numerous studies discussing and comparing the efficacy of the notion of perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998) in the process of producing human and other types of persons (Arhem 2016b; Brightman & Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012; Humphrey and Pedersen 2007).

While drawing inspiration from all of these approaches, I also emphasise their limited applicability in the context of Tuva, particularly with regard to a clear differentiation between human and other kinds of personhood. In so doing, I stress the importance of, for instance, influences from Buddhism (Humphrey 2007; Da Col 2007) or the complex characteristics of spirits (Broz 2007).

Engaging with the mechanics of cursing as integral to the characteristics of shamanic practice in Kyzyl, I have also sought to focus on the structural organisation of events during the rituals dedicated to curses. While presenting numerous case studies, punctuated by unexpected encounters and occurrences entailing humans and spirits, I have set out to emphasise the importance of inconsistency and uncertainty embedded in ritual proceedings. The element of unpredictability is somewhat neglected in studies concerned with ritual structure (Rappaport 1999) and ritualization (Bell 1992). Within these works, rituals are seen as ‘more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances’ (Rappaport 1999: 24), without being concerned with how their actions can ‘reorder and reinterpret the circumstances’ (Bell 1992: 109). In contrast to this, I suggest that it is indeed inconsistency that gives meaning to and shapes the structure of events in shamanic rituals. While building my argument, I discuss the role of the shamanic drum as a central element of the ritual that produces a particular kind of unsettlement and, therefore, a particular kind of turbulent space. I show how sounds of the drum commence the process of negotiations with spirits while opening up and discomposing things and, thus, producing a platform for conducting cosmic (re)arrangements by the shaman. This approach to shamanic drums differs from, and I hope will contribute to, wider conceptualisations of drums in anthropological literature that grasp them as symbolic instruments which allow the shamans to communicate with spirits and travel to different worlds (Shirokogoroff 1935; Eliade 1972; Li 1992); as mythological and cosmic representations (Pentikainen 2010); and as healing or therapeutic tools (Van Deusen 2004).

Extending the discussion on sounds produced by the drums, I seek to evaluate the importance and role of sounds produced by the shaman’s voice in the rituals. I argue that, as the sounds of the drum unsettle things, the sounds produced by the shaman’s voice do the opposite by providing temporary forms of sociocosmic

arrangements and patterning. By focusing on literature which illuminates the agentive role of sounds in rituals (Severi 2014, 2015; Brabec de Mori 2014; Townsley 1993) as well as indicates how communicative and social relation patterns can be derived from formal frameworks, particularly musical dimensions of performance (Feld 2012, Basso 1985, Seeger 1987), I have sought to challenge anthropological treatments of shamanic efficacy which emphasise the significance of shamanic chants and music, stressing the importance of words and their ‘magical’ power (Levi-Strauss 1963; Tambiah 1968; Olsen 1996; Malinowski 1965). Instead, I show how sounds produced by the shamanic voice are imbued with a potency of their own, independent of shamanic words, while actualising spirits, whose presence is felt by the clients, as explained by my informants, in the forms of a cold wind, murmur or even the image of the spirit. According to Tuvans, the real shaman is the one that can allow the client and the audience to physically experience the presence of spirits. This process, in turn, is closely associated with production of sounds and directly concerns the efficacy of the shamans’ skills and powers as well as shamans’ reputation within the community. Thus, I show how the idea of sound(s) and music bring together diverse themes discussed in this thesis, including curses, cursed personhood, turbulence, drums, and the efficacy of shamanic practice.

Finally, while taking inspiration from the studies which are concerned with the intersection of supposedly ‘traditional’ phenomena, such as witchcraft or shamanic practice, with elements of ‘modernity’, such as capitalism or democracy (Smith 2008; Ashforth 2005; Pels 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), I seek to go beyond the ideas of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ or ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ and illuminate how, within the context of Tuva, these terms remain somewhat ineffective. In the context of Post-Soviet Siberia, the increasing importance and visibility of shamanic practice have often been conceptualised through the ideas of cultural revivalism (Balzer 2005, 2008; Vitebsky 2003; Lindquist 2008; Buyandelgriyn 2007; Pimienova 2013; Shimamura 2004). Of course, the idea of cultural revivalism is often associated with the concept of ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm 2012; Linnekin 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). In this thesis, I would like to problematize these notions and their applicability to Tuva. Rather than the ‘old’ and ‘the new’ or a quest for specific ethnic identities, I suggest we need to place the emphasis on the experience and understanding of my

informants – for them, the challenges and chaotic nature of life in Post-Soviet Kyzyl is first and foremost ‘like a curse’; this is what I hope to explore and elucidate in this thesis.

Thus, to summarise, I seek to show how curses do not constitute direct responses to the ills or malcontents of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Gashiere 1998). Instead, they are independent events in the fabric of life and sociality in Kyzyl, situated within (rather than being about) a particular post-colonial realm characterised by, for instance, tensions in the shamanic and religious landscape, shifts in family structure, and introduction of technological developments. More than that, following Bubandt’s argument about ‘approaching anew the curious symbiosis between the uncertainties of witchcraft and the uncertainties of the modern condition’ (2014: 241), I show how the mechanics of cursing can be taken beyond the sphere of occultism, and, in a rather different fashion than so far presented in anthropological literature, be employed as distinct methodological tools in the process of exploring the post-colonial world.

Of course, beyond the significance of the more comparative themes I have tried to emphasise, it is important to situate the questions I shall try to answer in relation to the available literature on Tuva too. The anthropological studies in the ethnographic context of Tuva concentrated on numerous themes, including the characteristics of Tuvan shamanic practice (Kenin-Lopsan 1995, 2002; Lindquist 2005, 2008; Van Deusen 2004), institutionalisation of shamanism (Zorbas 2013; Pimienova 2013; Lindquist 2008; Stepanoff 2004) and perspectivism (Stepanoff 2009, 2015). There has been a lot of work done equally on the practice of throat singing (Süzükei 2010; Levin 2006; Levin and Edgerton 1999; Hodgkinson 2005/2006; Leighton 2000), identity (Mongush 2006; Pimienova 2009; Ballkina 1994) as well as economic and administrative transformations (Vainshtein 1980; Humphrey and Sneath 1999). The notion of cursing has been included in the works of Zorbas (2013) and Stepanoff (2014). I seek to contribute to all of these studies through exploring the mechanics of cursing and their relation to shamanic practice whilst illuminating the complex dynamics of life in post-Soviet Kyzyl.

In the next section, having discussed the ethnographic and analytical contexts within which my research is situated, I outline the methodological tools through which the above arguments were established and shaped.

## **Methodology**

This thesis is based on twelve months of fieldwork conducted from November 2014 to October 2015 in the capital city of Tuva, Kyzyl. The data presented and analysed in the following six chapters has been obtained through the means of structured and semi-structured interviews, recordings, drawings, and photographs, as well as an extensive process of participant observations performed during rituals taking place both inside and outside the city.

While gathering data regarding shamanic practice, I worked closely with a particular shaman, Hovalygmaa Kuular. Thanks to her and her family's incredible kindness and trust, I had a unique opportunity to visit Hovalygmaa on a daily basis at her home and interact with her three siblings, Olcheijma, Ladoj, and Lamba, also shamans. During this time, I conducted numerous interviews and initiated tens of discussions and, in this way, Hovalygmaa, along with her family, shared with me and explained to me in detail diverse aspects of Tuvan shamanic practice and the cursing phenomenon. With time, I became a regular visitor to their house and started to share with them every day routines, as well as accompany them to different events, such as a friend's birthday which had nothing to do with curses or instances of shamanising. They also welcomed with open arms my partner, who visited Kyzyl from Europe, and treated him as a member of their own family, despite language barriers. It was a form of trust and intimacy offered by shamans to complete strangers extremely rarely, if not, unheard of – and for that, I am truly grateful.

During the time I spent with the Kuular family, I observed Hovalygmaa closely at work in her office, situated near her house, where she met with clients and conducted preliminary divinatory practices. Moreover, I was allowed to visit the flats of her clients, conduct interviews with them, and observe intimate, private rituals dedicated primarily to curse deflection, as well as follow sporadic events of counter-cursing. In



Kyzyl, curse infliction rituals, although happening on a regular basis, constitute a very dangerous and thus highly concealed subject. It is extremely difficult to find a shaman or a shaman's client who would admit to curse infliction, mainly due to the fact that every inflicted curse is expected to be returned – that is, the one who is responsible is bound to be counter-cursed. Given this, I never participated in a ritual dedicated to curse infliction; nevertheless, I had a unique opportunity to take part in a few rituals which involved counter-cursing. Consequently, most of the ethnographic examples discussed in this thesis are dedicated to either curse deflection rituals or rituals focused on counter-cursing and, within this context, concerned with curse infliction.

I also had a unique chance to travel with Hovalygmaa to remote areas of Tuva where she performed numerous rituals dedicated to the care of spirits and gods residing outside of Kyzyl. Despite my research interests being focused on patterns of life within Kyzyl, the trips to the steppe and taiga provided me with invaluable data in line with my overall fieldwork objectives. Most of my trips to the countryside were conducted in the company of informants who permanently lived in the city and for whom rituals outside of Kyzyl constituted a way of maintaining interactions with certain spirits, such as masters of places (*eezi*). Relationships with these spirits, despite them residing outside of the urban settlement, were essential to the overall dynamics of urban sociality. Therefore, all of the data obtained during my fieldwork relates to the fabric of everyday life in the urban arena of Kyzyl.

Apart from working with the Kuular family, I had the opportunity to conduct extensive interviews with seven other shamans. Four of them worked individually whereas the other three were associated with the local shamanic societies, including the current director of one of the most famous shamanic societies in Tuva, Dungur (*Drum*). Thanks to help and support offered by the lecturers from the University of Kyzyl, I also gained access to the local representatives of the Buddhist temple and had an opportunity to conduct interviews with lamas regarding their perception of cursing phenomena and sociocultural processes occurring in post-Soviet Kyzyl. More than that, working as an English teacher at the university provided me with invaluable access to diverse groups of informants, including fierce critics of shamanic practice as well as strong supporters. In total, I conducted over one hundred interviews concerning

the proliferation of curses, as well as shamanism and shifts in the fabric of everyday life in post-Soviet Kyzyl.

Apart from Hovalygmaa and her family, I was lucky to continuously work with four other Kyzylians who became regular guides around the city. From the very beginning of my time in Tuva, I established close ties with Sofia, a secretary at the university and a single mother suffering from a powerful clan curse. Sofia was in her early thirties and shared with me a deep fascination for Scotland and the English language. She loved travelling, but always felt Tuva would never let go of her. We usually met for coffees and walks, during which, always in a lowered tone of voice, she revealed to me the secrets of social interactions in Kyzyl, such as who to fear and who not to trust, and also spoke about her different and often disappointing experiences with shamans. While facing diverse challenges at work and in her personal life on a daily basis, she always repeated to me in Russian '*Znachit, tak i dolzhno byt'sya*' – 'it was meant to be'.

Apart from Sofia, I spent a lot of time with students of archaeology and Tibetan Studies from the state university. In particular, I became good friends with Sajan, a young Korean language teacher who spoke about the objectives of my research with great skepticism and often laughter. He found most shamans to be fake and believed that curses were only substitutes for peoples' laziness and fear. While driving around the city with open windows and loud music, Sajan shared with me his unusually open critique of Kyzyl and its people. He always repeated, though, that he loved the place he came from and wanted to invest all his efforts and intellectual capacity in order to teach younger generations about the world and inspire them to pursue different dreams.

During my fieldwork, I also became close with Olga, the very first tourist guide in Tuva who, along with her husband – a throat singer – advertised trips to the countryside on Facebook. Their business constituted a form of unusual link between American as well as European tourists and Kyzyl. At first rather distant, soon enough Olga began to share with me her experiences of shamanic practice in Kyzyl and spoke of diverse curse incidents her family had faced over the years. Her narratives were full of uncertainty and concern for her children, who at a young age started to show some features of shamanic skills. Olga introduced me to two shamans non-associated with

the societies, and offered to translate parts of our conversations. She also took me to remote areas of Kyzyl where we spent time wandering without a purpose and talking about her life in the city as opposed to life in the taiga, where she had family and travelled during the summer and, occasionally, winter months.

Finally, one of my key informants aside from the shaman's family was Walentyna, an ethnomusicologist from the Tuvan Cultural Centre. Initially fascinated by quantum physics, Walentyna had an extensive knowledge of the Tuvan language and the Tuvan music tradition. At the beginning of our friendship, we exchanged English for Tuvan language lessons. With time, our meetings transformed into lengthy discussions about Kyzyl, shamans, and curses during which Walentyna answered my incessant questions with significant patience. Her observations of Kyzyl and shamans strongly echo throughout this thesis. More than that, it was Walentyna who introduced me to Hovalygmaa's family and, in a sense, supported me while I was encouraging the shaman to participate in my research.

Working closely with one family of shamans, with much of my effort focusing on one shaman in particular, may perhaps trigger questions regarding broadness and generalisability of my research and findings. In this thesis, I present the lived experiences of curse infliction and deflection as well as shamanic practice as described by the shaman as well as her clients and my key informants, while seeking to remain as accurate to what was crucial in these experiences as I am capable of. Without gaining the trust of the shaman (which is a difficult process) who had an established reputation within the community and without being introduced to her family, I would have no access to the experiences, stories, and tensions with which this thesis and its arguments are essentially concerned. Through working with Hovalygmaa, I connected with a wide network of her clients, their families, and, in some cases, even their clans. My relationship with the Kuular family constituted a form of a confirmation and guarantee to the people I interviewed that I was someone that could be permitted into their flats and into their stories without causing any undue harm. Thus, it was only through a close contact with a particular shaman that I could unveil and grasp the characteristics of shamanic practice and mechanics of cursing in Kyzyl.

Most of my informants spoke the Russian language, and the majority of the interviews were therefore conducted in Russian. Given my fluency in this language I did not require help from translators. Nonetheless, in the context of diverse terminology and key expressions, the Tuvan language was regularly used. In these instances, as I have acquired a pre-intermediate level of the Tuvan language, I always referred for clarification to my Tuvan language teacher Walentyna, as well as the shaman Hovalygmaa. Concurrently, especially during transcribing and translating shamanic chants performed during the rituals, I used the support and broad linguistic knowledge of Sean, a manager of the throat singing group Alash, and his patient wife Sveta.

In most cases, I took direct notes during the interviews, alongside recording them if this was permitted. Subsequently, I summarised my findings every evening while collecting my notes and observations. Furthermore, while focusing on the musical and acoustic aspects as crucial to the overall understanding of shamanic techniques, I recorded most of the rituals I participated in. This, in turn, gave me the opportunity to transcribe and translate some of the chants performed by the shamans during the rituals. Finally, while working with Hovalygmaa, we drafted diverse graphs and drawings in order to document distinct elements of Tuvan ontology, including cosmic structure, formation of personhood, and images of spirits. In the final section of this Introduction, I provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow.<sup>3</sup>

## **Thesis outline**

This thesis is divided into the following chapters. Chapter One begins with the introduction of the phenomenon of curse in post-Soviet Kyzyl. The first part engages with the overall characteristics of cursing. In so doing, it concentrates on the taxonomy of curses and discusses how they constitute an intrinsic element of a wider network of fluctuating energies, which includes the attributes of misfortune and good luck. The second part of the chapter delineates the distinct topography of cursing in Kyzyl.

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<sup>3</sup> Fragments of Chapter Two and Chapter Six of this thesis have been published in *Curare*, Journal of Medical Anthropology and in the *Occult Moderne* Series. Parts of Chapter Five constitute a core of the article for the *Shaman* journal (currently, under reviewing stage).

Particular stress is placed upon the urbanised environment and the way its compactness and forced proximity contribute to the proliferation of curses. Along these lines, the chapter traces the flow of curses from pre-Soviet Tuva to post-Soviet Kyzyl, presenting Kyzyl as an enforced, bounded space of coalescent forces and people as opposed to dispersed features of being in the steppe and taiga. In order to illustrate this, the chapter engages with relationships of kinship as well as economic and political interactions deeply permeated by continuous cursing practices.

Given the centrality of shamanic practice to the mechanics of cursing, Chapter 2 moves on to discuss the distinctiveness of shamanic practice in Tuva. Firstly, while referring to a ‘case study’ of the shaman Hovalygmaa, it focuses on shamanising as a pragmatic form of ‘housekeeping’ contingent on a skill described as seeing and hearing what usually cannot be seen or heard. Consequently, while engaging with the classification of different shamans, such as earth or sky shamans, the chapter discusses the implications of the word ‘evil’ as well as the expressions ‘white/ black shamanism’ as having ontic rather than moral connotations. Finally, the chapter explores the unique elements of Tuvan shamanic techniques, including divination practices and a rejection of any trance-like experiences introducing, thus, briefly the role of sound in shamanising.

Chapter Three pursues the experiences of curse affliction as essential to the understanding of the complexity of occult phenomena and shamanic practice in post-Soviet Kyzyl. In doing so, it concentrates on the notion of cursed personhood. Firstly, the chapter discusses the general structure of human personhood in Tuva as constructed from numerous interdependent layers. Subsequently, it illuminates which aspects of human personhood are given and which are acquired over the life course whilst delineating what it means to be a human in comparison to other types of persons in Tuvan ontology. The chapter moves on to discuss how cursing transforms the victims into turbulent beings.

Having discussed the tripartite relationship between shamans, clients, and curses as well as having introduced the notion of turbulence, Chapter Four extends these reflections and shows how shamans, cursed victims and turbulence come together in the ritual context. In so doing, the chapter firstly illuminates how turbulence

is integral not only to experiences of cursing, but also characterises other aspects of life in Tuva, including cosmic dynamics, mobility patterns, language, and sound. In particular, the chapter focuses on the role of the shamanic drum and illuminates how drums constitute central elements in the shamanic rituals of curse-deflection or infliction. It also delineates how the sounds of the drum unsettle things while producing turbulence indispensable to the shaman and negotiations with spirits. While engaging with different ritual orders, the chapter also delineates how the structure of sound production in throat singing is homologous to the way sound is structured in shamanic rituals.

Chapter Five continues the discussion of sound and its significance in shamanic rituals by focusing on the importance of the shaman's voice. In particular, it shows how, while the sound of the shamanic drum unsettles, the sounds produced by the shaman's voice establish afresh certain arrangements, exemplified in curse infliction or deflection actions while re-situating them in the incessant flow of cosmic energies. More than that, while engaging with the agential role of sounds, the chapter shows how through modulating their voices, shamans actualise spirits and make them materially present. Along these lines, the chapter illuminates how the process of voice modulation and accurate sound production remains essential in the context of shamanic practice and its efficacy – in other words, the chapter shows how being 'a good shaman' (*eki ham*) is intertwined with the proper way of producing sounds.

The processes occurring in post-Soviet Kyzyl form the focus of Chapter Six. It illuminates how life in Kyzyl is described and experienced like curses. Emphasising the role of shock, disturbance and uncertainty associated with cursing, the chapter concentrates on different representations of post-colonial conflicts, such as, tensions between individual shamans and shamans from the societies, shifts in the religious and family landscapes, alcoholism, disease and technological development. More than that, the chapter delineates how the shifts occurring in post-Soviet Kyzyl can be effectively analysed without reverting to the already exhausted ideas about cultural revivalism and ethnic rediscovery, dominating in the studies of the post-colonial sociocultural landscapes.

Taken together, the chapters in this thesis discuss the process of cursing as intimately intertwined with shamanic practice. The analysis presented throughout the thesis is set in the context of political, economic and sociocultural dynamics occurring within the post-Soviet arena of the city Kyzyl in Tuva. I hope to show both the particularity of Tuvan practices and to explore the way they are perceived by my informants without reducing them to conflicts emerging from the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the capitalist market. Placing the emphasis on my informants' experience and their words, the chapters seek to contribute to anthropological studies of occultism and post-colonial realms by re-situating conceptualisations of sound, trance, ritual events, personhood and ideas of 'tradition' and 'modernity' around the lived experiences of curse and shamanic practice in Kyzyl.





## Chapter one

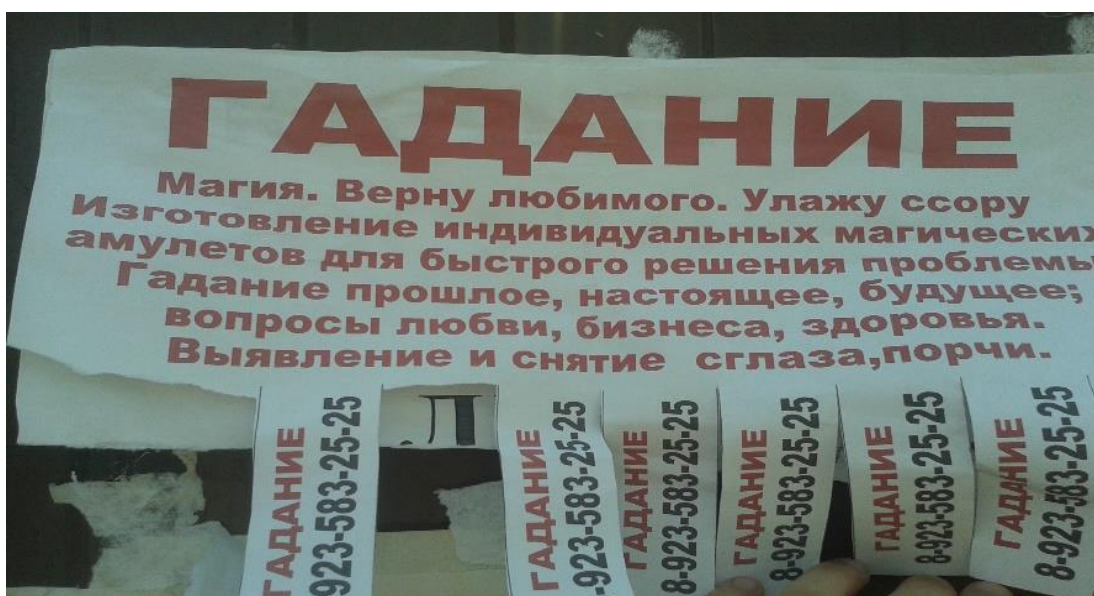
### In the midst of cursing battles: Curses, proximity and sociocosmic drama

#### Introduction

‘You know, the beauty of our city lies in the fact that you walk around and everything seems normal to you. And yet, you are unaware that it is behind these walls, in whispers, in curses and negotiations with spirits that our lives unfold’, Ajlana said suddenly to me during one of our long walks around the city centre. She was a newly appointed secretary at the Tuvan State University and we were discussing the challenges Ajlana was about to face at work, in particular her tough-minded boss. I asked my friend if she could do anything in order to ease the job transition and soften her superior. In reply, Ajlana pointed to her cell phone and whispered: ‘We could call a shaman’. I knew she had in mind a curse infliction request.

Indeed, whilst highly ambiguous and rarely discussed, cursing practices constitute a constant and well-established element of everyday life in Kyzyl. Nevertheless, for a significant amount of time, my informants either pretended they did not hear any curse-related questions or kept on angrily waving their hands towards the Sayan mountains, stressing it was a ‘dirty thing’ (*hirlig chüül*) coming from ‘there’ (*mynaar*), most of the time implying the Russians. Despite my interviewees’ assertions, ‘magical business’ (Rus. *magicheskije dela*) as one of my friends referred to it, seemed to be blossoming in Kyzyl. The local markets, which sold everything from meat, cheese, fish and clothes to jewellery and mobile phones, flourished with women called ‘gypsies’ by Kyzylis. Every day, dressed in long, dark skirts and covering their heads with colourful scarves, these women, the majority of them immigrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, eagerly stopped people and offered different ‘magical’ practices, including curse detection and infliction rituals. A variety

of posters displayed on the fences and walls of the buildings around the city encouraged future clients to call if they had queries about their love life, health, business or curses (see Figure 2). Television programmes alternated with colourful adverts where fortune tellers praised the efficiency of their magical services. Nonetheless, my informants' resilience and apparent obliviousness to these practices were astonishing. Any questions about cursing were consistently met with laughter and assertions that it was the doings of the Uzbeks, the Tajiks or the Russians. However, gathering information from discrete conversations at Ajlana's work, the content of which she occasionally shared with me, I knew there was something else



**Figure 2:** A street advert encouraging people to contact a practitioner who can deflect curses, predict future, help with love-related issues, etc.

happening in flats, offices and government buildings. It was something that would not be talked about openly and yet it seemed to remain an integral element of peoples' everyday interactions. It was not until I became very good friends with a local family of four shamans that the world of curse finally decided to fully open its doors to me. One day, I asked them how common it was for people to suffer from curses in Tuva. They welcomed my question with warm laughter; 'What do you think? If it was not for curses the shamans would be out of work'.

The main focus of this chapter is introducing and analytically grounding the phenomenon of curse in the context of post-Soviet Kyzyl, the capital of Tuva. In so doing, I discuss how within the unpredictable economic and political landscapes of post-Soviet Kyzyl, cursing is linked with the need for survival and ability to retain minimum control over one's existence, which pertains mainly to humans, but also, in some instances, becomes applicable to spirits. In this way, I focus on the instrumental use of curses as a construct shaped by powerful emotional motivations, such as envy (*adaargaachaly*), fear (*korgush*) and a craving for vengeance (*özeen*), where these psychological impulses are grasped as 'impetus for action and a driving force for a particular kind of engagement' (Bubandt 2014: 239) with the world.

Approaching cursing practices as distinct social actions, I show how the proliferation of 'magical business' in the ethnographic context of post-Soviet Kyzyl, although echoing interpretations rooted in discourses about new wealth and power acquisition (Geshiere 1997), makes one think about machinery of cursing beyond the framework of 'occult economies' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Instead, it points to the multivocal characteristics of cursing practices intimately interwoven with wider sociocosmological processes. Concentrating on the mechanics of curse infliction and deflection, I seek to illuminate how curses become constitutive not only of human conflicts, but also human and non-human interactions and, in this way, remain intrinsic to sociocosmic dynamics in Tuva. Along these lines, I show how the phenomenon of curse provides an analytical platform that allows me to trace and investigate these dynamics as intensified and more obvious, rather than directly triggered by the collapse of the Soviet regime. In this way, I emphasise that the realm of spirits is integral to the production of the everyday life in Kyzyl rather than incompatible with it or invented.

While drawing on approaches to the study of witchcraft as ambiguous and fragmentary (Geshiere 1998; Ashforth 2005; Bubandt 2014), in this chapter I discuss how curses in Tuva are perceived as a part of the wider network of fluctuating energies that can be controlled, increased and tamed. Consequently, I argue that the proliferation of occult phenomena in post-Soviet Kyzyl cannot be effectively understood as directly triggered by the Soviet dissolution, but rather should be approached from an angle of dispersion and coalescence – the angle that emphasises

fluidity. Tracing the flow of curses from pre-Soviet Tuva to post-Soviet Kyzyl, I propose therefore to focus on the questions of spatial and social proximity. In order to illustrate my argument, I analyse different social dynamics within the sphere of family and neighbours as well as broader economic and political relationships. I show how interactions in post-Soviet Kyzyl are animated, in the first place, by a too intense sociability triggered by increased urbanisation and changes in physical distance, rather than introduction of new market economy and commerce.

In order to delineate my argument, this chapter is split into three main sections. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the distinctive characteristics of the notion of curse in Tuva. In short, I present what curses are and how they work. Consequently, while approaching the notion of curse as sociocosmic drama, I concentrate on who can inflict curses and what implications this has for human and non-human interactions. In the second section of this chapter, I focus on the conceptualisations of curses as a part of the wider politics of (mis)fortune understood as a system of fluctuating energies that can be controlled and navigated. In the final part of the chapter, I explore the proliferation and omnipresence of curses in post-Soviet Kyzyl. While approaching the urban space as a coalescence of tensions and people that are no longer suppressed by the Soviet regime, I engage with the relations of kinship as well as economic, political, and administrative ties in the capital that are pervaded by conflicts and thus cursing.

## **1. The characteristics of curses in Tuva**

Despite the fact that the Soviet regime ended over twenty years ago, everyday life in Kyzyl continues to feel as if permeated by the vapours of the Soviet era. Indeed, Tuva, similarly to Russia, remains a place where many events occur behind closed doors, as if in secrecy, where decisions and choices are imbricated in the complex nexus of connections and ties contingent on the wider factors and figures that remain unknown to Tuvans. In short, everyday life in Kyzyl seems to be characterised by perpetual ambiguity and unpredictability. This, in turn, has particular implications for conceptualisations of the practice of cursing.

During my fieldwork in Kyzyl, I was often involved in the confusing labyrinth of connections and decisions when trying to obtain diverse permissions, establish contacts with people or, simply, find a place to live. Rarely things progressed according to any obvious rationale and even less frequently could I rely on distinct legal tools, such as contracts, formal agreements, etc. In one case, I felt particularly concerned about the future of my research and initially sought to exercise legal rights I believed I had as a foreign citizen. Much to my surprise, I quickly found out that if I wanted to continue my work, I had to forget official disputes and quietly give in to local politics. I still lived with the conviction I had a choice and I could simply abandon the fieldwork at any given time. Indeed, it was not until then that I truly grasped the relationship between the issue of choice and the ontology of curse. While deeply disturbed, I shared some concerns with one of my Kyzylian friends, Sajan, as well as the shaman Hovalygmaa. After I described the problem to them, Sajan smiled at me and said: ‘Now you felt on your own skin, what it means to live here. We often feel hopeless. You curse so that you have some control over your own life’. The shaman’s reaction was much more pragmatic. I had not even finished the story when her face froze and she sprang to her feet: ‘What do you want to do? Do you want me to curse this person? What is their name? Should I break a leg, or perhaps make them fall into coma?’ Indeed, she was not joking. When I refused to undertake any actions, the shaman remained very confused. ‘I do not understand, if someone hurts you, you have to send it back’, she concluded and gave me an angry look.

The aforementioned examples have particular implications for the conceptualisation of occult phenomena in the ethnographic context of Tuva. Inevitably, the collapse of the Soviet regime intensified occult practices by generating more risks and introducing what Humphrey defines as new ‘post-Soviet sensibilities’ (1999: 8). People have become more sensitive to their privacy, and remain concerned about being spied on, judged or envied by others. Consequently, they refer to cursing in order to secure their jobs, to have stable financial income or to take revenge on their neighbours, colleagues and ex-partners, which can be driven by jealousy but also by anger, fear or hopelessness. More than that, as mentioned earlier, cursing practices are often described by people as ‘magical business’ (Rus. *magicheskiye dela*). Indeed, from this angle cursing practices can be explained, to some extent, through the frameworks

of ‘occult economies’, understood as the deployment of magical means for material ends (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 284). Nevertheless, these approaches remain reductive in the sense that they omit the more complex and practical conceptualisations of curses as social actions embedded in wider historical and cosmological contexts. In short, cursing in Kyzyl does not constitute a mystical art of getting rich, but rather ‘a strategy for survival’ (Niehaus 2005: 194) essential to humans as well as to spirits (which I shall illustrate later on in this Chapter). Moreover, social tensions which trigger the urge to deploy cursing practices are not rooted directly in the economic transformations from state to capitalistic economies. Conversely, while proliferating within the urban arena, they are intimately associated with shifts in the mechanics of sociality generated by changes in spatial proximity.

In order to introduce and foreground the wider socioeconomic, political and cosmological implications of the phenomenon of cursing in post-Soviet Kyzyl with which this chapter is concerned, it is essential to delineate the key characteristics of curses and the basic mechanics that the process of cursing involves.

### 1.1. Taxonomy of curses

In Tuva, when someone is under the influence of curse, people say that they ‘run down the roads like swirls’ (*oruk ezinneldir mangnaar*). Their behaviour is meant to resemble the erratic, unpredictable waves of the wind. Curses are described as particular immaterial energies (*kyshter*) which can enter the victims through their head with great speed while triggering whirls (*ezinneldir*) and swirls (*duvulendir*). This process has been also described by my informants in Russian as turbulence (Rus. *turbulentnost*) and shock (Rus. *shok*). Even though curses can be traced to one singular moment, in fact they constitute an omnipresent, continuous threat that permeates people’s interactions on a daily basis and flourishes among families and friends, in working environments as well as in the sphere of formal politics.

Tuvans recognise two main types of curses; *chatka* (‘curse’) and *kargysh* (‘gossip’). This differentiation echoes conceptualisations of occult phenomena in Mongolia grasped within the concept of ontology of ‘bad speech’ (Swancutt 2012:

127) as malicious gossip *hel am* (Swancutt 2012, Højer 2004, Humphrey 2012) or curse *haraal* (Delaplace 2014, High 2007/2008) and *arson* ('the curse of fire') (Empson 2011: 303). In Tuva, both terms – *kargysh* and *chatka* – are used interchangeably with reference to cursing in general, and often, especially in shamanic chants, as one expression *chatka-kargysh*. Differences between the two are very subtle and, in fact, it is only the shamans who can easily provide a clear differentiation between them. *Chatka* occurs when a person intends to harm another person; however, in order to do so, one must turn for help to a strong shaman (*shydaldyg ham*). Inflicting *chatka* is meant to mainly result in a broken leg, a stroke, a prolonged disease and, in the worst case, death. *Kargysh* may, rarely, occur without shamanic help, simply by muttering ill words (*ass-dyldy-bile*) or thinking bad thoughts (*bodal-sagyzjy-bile*) about the victim. It is often followed by spitting (*dükpürer*) or throwing (*dazjaar*) sand or soil.

Among the other types of curses recognised by Tuvans the most difficult one to deflect is the clan<sup>4</sup> curse (*doora nugul*). *Doora nugul* can affect descendants in both female and male lines. It holds for at least seven generations and is inherited by blood. The implications of this curse can be truly traumatising for the victims and their families, as illustrated in the case of one of my informants, Sofia, who was suffering from a clan curse inflicted upon her kin sometime at the beginning of the twentieth century. At a time when food was scarce, one of Sofia's female ancestors tried to steal meat from another yurt and a host of the yurt cursed the woman. Since that day, every female descendant in Sofia's clan was meant to suffer from an unfulfilled and lonely love life. Indeed, Sofia never got married and men would always leave her abruptly

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<sup>4</sup> In the past, the Tuvans referred to clans as *söök* ('bone') (Vainshtein 1981: 238). These were patrilineal groups in which the heads of the families shared a common ancestor through the male line, however, they usually did not entail economic relations arising from the membership of the clan (ibid.). With time, clans started to be confused with *arban* and *summon*, the administrative territorial units introduced during the Manchu empire (Humphrey 1981: 24). Consequently, patrilines gradually disappeared during the Manchu period (mid-eighteen to twentieth century) as functioning units of society (ibid.: 25). Apart from patrilines, of high importance were also patronymic groups, in which the heads of the family shared not only blood-relationships, but also economic ties (Vainshtein 1981: 240-214). Moreover, *aals*, the main productive groups, were, in fact, often constituted from small kinship groups (ibid.: 243). During the Soviet regime, *aals* and patronymic groups disappeared and were replaced with collective forms of production known as *sovkhoz* and *kolkhoz* (Forsyth 1992: 290). Today, patrilineal kinship retains its importance within the sphere of ideology and the realm of spirits, that is, in the context of interactions with spirits performed through rituals dedicated to curse deflection/infliction as well as ceremonies worshipping the spirits of places (*eezi*).

after a few months of a relationship. She was a single mother and struggled in maintaining friendships with other women, who considered her as a possible threat to their marriages. The same thing happened to Sofia's mother as well as to her cousins and some other older female relatives. Sofia had a daughter and, at the time of our conversation, she was in the process of organising a clan ritual which would break the curse and secure her child's future happiness. Like in the case of Sofia, clan curses in Tuva are usually associated with a variety of particularly persistent problems ranging from obstacles in relationships to poverty or general perpetual turmoil in life. Interestingly, it is very common to ascribe clan curses to all forms of disabilities that children are born with, such as autism, bodily deformations or deafness.

Moreover, the possibility of suffering from curses is often contingent on the previous lives of the victim. In this way, the potency of curse is intimately intertwined with the karmic system, which determines one's susceptibility to curses by the deeds one had executed in previous lives. In short, the more intentional harm someone caused in their past lives, the higher chance they have of suffering from curses in the next life.<sup>5</sup> For instance, people who suddenly fall ill and subsequently die are described as those who in their previous life had intended to kill by lying, gossiping or wishing death upon another person. In a similar manner, the aforementioned disabilities, if not accounted for by a clan curse, are often considered as a result of attempting to curse or harm someone in a previous life.

## **1.2. How curses are inflicted**

In Siberian cosmologies, the agency of inflicting misfortune which involves cursing is often attributed to aggrieved ancestors (Humphrey 1996b), neglected spirits (Pedersen 2011) or to human-human interactions (Swancutt 2012). In Tuva, the machinery of curse is contingent on a complex matrix of relationships, which includes humans, spirits and shamans. Curses explicitly acquire their initial potency from the bad intentions of humans. However, the mechanics of cursing require at least three actors for a curse to be successfully inflicted. This triadic relationship involves the

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss the relation between curses, the Buddhist karmic system and past lives in Chapter Three.



victim, the one who casts the curse and the spirit who inflicts the curse on behalf of the aggressor. In short, people have no immediate agency in casting curses, and curse as energy has to be carried out by one of the spirits. It is thus the spirit that enters the victim's body and it is the spirit who continuously manipulates how the curse affects the victim. In most cases, this procedure requires the simultaneous presence of the shaman, as the clients turn to them in order to summon the spirits as well as to ensure particular results of curse, i.e. death, broken limbs, addictions. Moreover, spirits, although acting on behalf of humans and responding to shamans' requests, often have their own agendas associated with cursing, a point to which I shall return later in this chapter. Occasionally, it is possible for the gods<sup>6</sup> to inflict curses if they become aggravated by the actions of the humans. Inflicting these curses does not require the presence of a shaman and constitutes the phenomenon that is rather challenging to deflect.

The spirits responsible for inflicting curses come from the group of *aza* ('evil') spirits.<sup>7</sup> People refer to them as *Chetker* and *Buktar* (sing. *Buk*). A *Chetker* spirit is said to come from the 'country' (*oran*) where the yellow river flows and where *aza* spirits sit in circles in front of their yurts and smoke pipes. A *Buk* lives among people, lingers in the streets or wanders around the steppe. Both spirits have particular physiques. *Chetker* is described as having only half of the face as well as decomposing or rotten body whilst *Buk* wanders in dirty, shredded clothes. *Chetker* and *Buktar* usually work for the shaman or along with them in the process of inflicting curse. Sometimes, they operate without the shaman's calling. This happens when they carry out and execute curses inflicted on humans as a result of their deeds performed in previous lives. Sometimes, the spirits spontaneously, without the shaman's calling, decide to respond to someone's angry gossiping (*kargysh*). Indeed, I was told stories about spirits meandering through the streets, hiding in the gardens, and was warned to be vigilant of what I say and think in their presence. This is how one of the shamans described this process to me:

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<sup>6</sup> I briefly explain the pantheon of Tuvan gods in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup> The classification of spirits in Tuva as good or evil has ontic rather than moral implications, a point which I discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Once you start wishing someone unwell, spirits will come to you and do what you think or say. This is their role here; this is what they feed off. But after they always return for their price: an offering, some food or tea with milk. Sometimes, if the curse is bad, they can return and break your finger. If they do not receive their price they will send horrible curse as a punishment.

When demonstrating their intent to cast curses, Tuvans often spit, throw sand or vodka while muttering harmful words. The shamans tend to use vodka, black tea, and, in cases of death curse, mutton's blood. The use of all these substances is associated with the conviction that liquids, especially spit and blood, can easily convey information and thus quickly summon the spirits responsible for inflicting curses upon the victim. When spirits enter the body of the client they are said to nest in the stomach, intestines or chest. Sometimes, rather than entering the body, they begin to live with the victim, observe them and follow them in their everyday routines. In these instances, they can take on different animal forms, such as dogs, serpents or mice. On other occasions, they can transform into a beautiful woman or take on the physique of deceased relatives and linger around the room while watching their victims.

### **1.3. How curses affect the victims**

Once a curse enters the victim's physical body with help from spirits, it begins to 'disturb' (*üreer*) their emotions, interactions with other people and health. Simultaneously, the physical body begins to pollute and curse materialises in a form of 'mud' (*hir*) visible to the shamans. People suffering from curses may drastically change their behaviour and forget their usual routines and habits. While functioning out of character, they are stubborn and unpredictable in their decisions while often displaying fears of being observed and gossiped about. Concurrently, they might suffer from unexpected medical conditions, become particularly aggressive and prone to crime or addictions. It is common to initially search for remedies to physical problems in hospitals, for instance, as in the cases of sudden illnesses. Very often, however, people turn simultaneously to shamans and lamas, following the ideology of 'whatever works'.

In general, understanding the onset of sudden unusual symptoms, especially behaviour-related, from a perspective of a 'psychological' or psychiatric problem triggers anxiety and fear. Nonetheless, it gradually gains some recognition among people who decide to pursue psychological studies, primarily outside Tuva. Otherwise, sudden changes in behaviour are rather kept secret, perhaps still bearing stigma from Soviet times, when individuals suffering from, for instance, shamanic illness were taken by Russians to psychiatric hospitals. Interestingly, the shamans remain very vigilant when diagnosing the causes of given suffering. They clearly differentiate if the problem was triggered by curse or other factors and, therefore, whether it requires assistance from a shaman or other practitioners, such as medical doctors or a psychiatrist.

#### **1.4. Sociocosmic drama**

As discussed earlier, cursing constitutes a mechanism which involves humans and spirits alike and, as such, it often presents a distinct sociocosmic drama. The crucial reason why the spirits are eager to engage in inflicting curses is that, similarly to people, they are said to struggle with their own being in post-Soviet times. Their own places of residence are described as economically tormented and destroyed, thus mirroring, to a certain extent, the turbulent characteristics of everyday life in Kyzyl. The spirits feel poor, angry and lonely, and casting curses allows them to become closer to the spaces where humans live, which seem to them rich and economically stable. Consequently, living in, on or around the human is, as one of the shamans put it, like being in a five-star hotel with all the associated luxury. In short, even though in the instances of cursing spirits usually act on behalf of humans, they concurrently perceive the possibility to curse as a desirable instrument, allowing them to improve their otherwise challenging existence. The process of curse deflection, which heavily relies on sending the spirits back to where they came from, is therefore very dramatic. The spirits tend to cry and howl, and they often beg the shaman to stop and accuse the shaman of cruelty. It is common for the spirits to adopt the physical appearance of a deceased relative and, in this disguise, accuse the shaman of keeping the deceased away from their family. In shamans' descriptions, these emotionally dense

negotiations, which constitute an integral part of the rituals, can be gruelling and tormenting for both the shaman and the spirit.

This dramaturgy develops further when people undertake actions in order to mislead the spirits and protect themselves from the undetected cursing. The methods employed are based on a combination of trickery and amulets. After each curse deflection ritual, the shaman provides the client with a special *eeren* ('token'), which sometimes is inhabited by one of the protective spirits. *Eeren*, however, has to be blessed yearly with juniper, otherwise it may lose its protective energy. There are further methods by which *aza* spirits can be tricked. Wearing a hat the other way around or wearing clothes inside out while travelling is the best way of misleading *Chetker* and *Buk*. Moreover, there are particular methods of protecting children, which also apply to foreigners who decide to closely interact with the shamans. These strategies include placing soot on the nose while walking at night or caring protective *eeren*, such as a palm of a bear. Very often, children are called *öjze cögleer* ('horrible names'), for example, 'you shit boy' (*myjak ool*), 'glutton boy' (*hymtak ool*) or 'blue stomach boy' (*kok hyryn ool*). These names are meant to disinterest *Chetker* and *Buk*.

In Tuva, once the curse obtains its potency it is impossible to avoid it without resorting to help from a shaman. Other methods, such as escaping curses through changing a family name (Swancutt 2008), prove to be unsuccessful. As a result, it is very common to visit the chosen shaman to conduct what can be described as 'curse check ups' and regular cleansing rituals in order to remove dirt, even if people do not experience any unexpected sufferings or harm. The most common time of the year to conduct a cleansing ritual (*aryglaashkyn*) is before *shagaa* ('Tuvan New Year') which takes place in February, the exact date of which is, interestingly, decided exclusively by the lamas.

In summary, the phenomenon of curse in Tuva constitutes a distinct sociocosmic drama contingent not only on the conflicts between humans, but also on tensions and challenges that directly concern the spirits. On the one hand, people in Kyzyl are to a significant extent dependent on *Chektek-Buktar* spirits in the process of inflicting curses and constantly try to trick them. On the other hand, spirits strive to live around people and interfere in their lives while protesting and lamenting when

being sent away by the shamans. In this way, rather than being perceived as a unified discourse about accumulation of wealth and power in a post-colonial milieu, the phenomenon of cursing is associated with the unfolding of wider sociocosmic dramaturgy, which involves spirits and humans alike and constitutes an imminent aspect of the Tuvan sociality in general.

Having introduced the basic characteristics of cursing, in the next section I engage with curses as an integral part of a wider network of fluctuating and controllable energies that produce a distinct politics of (mis)fortune, the fluid properties of which remain essential for further understanding of the proliferation of cursing in post-Soviet Kyzyl.

## **2. Managing the flow: Curses as fluctuating energies**

In Tuva, people always say that every event must have some sort of explanation, echoing to a certain extent Evans-Pritchard's classic reading of witchcraft as a natural philosophy (1971). As one of the shamans put it: 'In our world there are no coincidences, everything has to be explained. Do you see how difficult our life is?' This deterministic grasp of life poses perpetual challenges for the shamans, as only they are able to clearly differentiate between various causes of misfortune (*haj*) and bring or increase good luck (*kezjik, aas kezjik*).

The system of explanations associated with a variety of sufferings and harm as well as fortune is a rich and complex structure and the potency of cursing constitutes one of its essential pillars. According to the Tuvan ontology of misfortune, it can be attributed to violation of taboos, such as polluting water, spitting in the fire, leaving trash in the steppe or neglecting masters of places. It can be further triggered by an event pertaining to the victim's *chol* (one of the terms for Tuvan 'destiny') or be associated with the Buddhist karmic system. In the majority of cases I have studied, however, misfortune has been linked with curses.

Among the types of misfortune contingent on the potency of cursing, Tuvans recognise *doora* ('a thing that lies across the road'), *haj-bachyt* ('an abrupt event') and *halap* ('natural disaster'). *Doora* can reveal itself in a form of a tree on a path, an

illness, being passed up for promotion, or a broken car. When speaking about *haj-bachyt*, Tuvans refer to a tragic event which leads to an abrupt death. In these instances, they often say *haj-bachyt tovaryn*, which can be translated as ‘something has swept a person from the road’. Finally, Tuvans recognise natural disasters, which can be instigated as a result of cursing, such as *hal-halap* (‘wind disasters’), *sug-halap* (‘water disasters’), and *hurt-halap* (‘fire disasters’). Interestingly, the continuing increase in car accidents has been categorised as a separate type of misfortune caused by curses called *aily-halap* (‘crash’). During the diagnosis process, the shamans carefully assess which of the incidents is associated with curse or, for instance, one’s destiny (*chol*). If the shamans have honest intentions, then they will undertake ritual actions only if harm was triggered through external factors rather than someone’s fate or deeds performed in previous lives. In latter cases, suffering is expected to be endured without any shamanic interventions. If the shamans are greedy and seek new business opportunities, then they may attempt to lie to their victims in order to secure recurring visits and continuous payment.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the proposed solutions, it is impossible to leave the shaman without knowing what the cause of any given incident or harm was.

In a similar manner, good fortune is not accidental, but must be controlled and navigated. It can be either acquired from previous lives or can be gradually improved through good deeds and a variety of rituals aiming at increasing one’s luck in the current life and securing its growth in the next lives. Sometimes, however, one’s sudden success, for instance a promotion, might be attributed to curses intentionally inflicted upon a rival.

This deterministic conceptualisation of (mis)fortune, in which causality is associated with concrete external forces, does not pertain exclusively to Tuva. Within the wider context of Siberian studies, the notions of good and bad luck, rather than being understood through the idioms of chance and coincidence, are approached as ‘a fluctuating state of being’ (Humphrey and Ujeed 2012: 153) that can be thus

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<sup>8</sup> In Tuva, shamans are expected to always receive some sort of payment for any services they provide, i.e. rituals, consultations, etc. These are usually monetary payments, the amount of which is decided by the clients themselves. In rare cases, the shamans can be paid with food or presents. Contrary to independent or ‘real’ (*jozulug*) shamans, shamans from the societies as well as impostors are recognised by providing fixed prices for their services, which is openly criticised by Tuvans. I discuss this phenomenon further in Chapter Six.

controlled, anticipated, produced, negotiated as well as destroyed (Broz and Willerslev 2012; Hamayon 2012; Empson 2012). In a similar fashion, in Tuva bad and good fortune and, intertwined with it, curses do not constitute afflictions that can be acquired or lost accidentally. Conversely, rather than ‘finite possessions’ (Humphrey and Ujeed 2012: 153), they are a part of the wider matrix of fluctuating energies that can be shared, increased and acted upon in multifarious ways. In order to illustrate these fluid characteristics further, I provide a short ethnographic vignette from the shamanic ritual dedicated to increasing the fortune of one of the Tuvan clans.

### **2.1. Increasing fortune, alleviating suffering**

Spring is the time of the year in Tuva when the shamans’ schedules become very busy. It is the season when different clans gather in order to conduct annual rituals, which usually take place outside of the town. This yearly traverse of going out and coming back to the city is associated with re-establishing and maintaining connections with the spirits that do not inhabit urban spaces and yet remain integral to the Tuvan non-rural sociality through their ability to distribute good fortune and alleviate suffering. Each clan usually has their own *ovaa*, that is, a pile of stones where the spirit of the mountain or a hill resides, as well as a sacred spring (*arzjaan*) and a tree (*baj-yjash*) that are inhabited by the masters of place who take care of a chosen clan. The rituals taking place near these sacred spots are conducted every year for three consecutively years and, then, renewed after another seven years. The Tuvans are said to be born with a given amount of fortune (*kezzik*) and pollution or dirt (*nugul*) carried from previous lives which can be further increased as well as decay during the course of one’s life. Consequently, each of the rituals is meant to cleanse the clan members, deflect curses and increase their good fortune.

In the first week of May, I was on my way to the ritual dedicated to the master of place living near the sacred tree that was chosen by the shamans for the Mongush clan. The ritual conducted in the previous year was particularly successful. The clan had asked for one of their members, a woman in her late forties, to get pregnant. A few weeks after the ritual, the woman found out she was expecting and eventually gave

birth to a healthy boy. Encouraged by this successful outcome, a year later the clan gathered again hoping to obtain more good fortune, this time especially within the financial sphere. After the food offerings, the clan members hung on strips of material (*chalama*) and white small sheets of fabric on the tree branches where they drew or wrote what they wished for. Then, everyone gathered a short distance from the tree and the shaman, as if in a small amphitheatre. We waited in silence as the shaman spoke to the spirit of the tree<sup>9</sup> and then sprinkled us with tea and milk, consumed earlier by the spirit. People were trying to catch as much of the substance as possible and applied it on their faces and arms. Next, the shaman walked around the tree drumming and shouting *kudaj kudaj kudaj, ass kezzik kudaj* ('please give us good fortune, please give us'). The clan members walked behind the shaman, each time repeating her words and putting their hands together as if trying to catch the streams of invisible fortune coming from the spirit of the tree while simultaneously touching the branches and leaves. We were instructed by the shaman to touch the tree with full hands and then to make big circles around our bodies in order to obtain as much energy as possible. Finally, everyone walked three times through the smoke from the nearby fire after the shaman extinguished it with tea and milk and, in this way, fed the spirit of the tree again and concluded the ritual (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

This short vignette illustrates how the notion of (mis)fortune in Tuva represents a particular economy of exchange and accumulation of energies that are represented in the form of (in)visible substances. The practices of establishing the physical connection with different objects as vessels of energy, like trees, as well as applying tea with milk and smoke onto the body, constitute particular techniques of harvesting good energy and cleansing the person, including alleviating suffering triggered by curse. In a similar way, as mentioned earlier, curse infliction is associated with distributing different liquids, such as saliva, blood or black tea, or thinking bad thoughts and speaking ill words. In this way, to echo Humphrey and Ujeed's argument (2012), the notion of (mis)fortune, including curses, rather than being externalised through zoomorphic or anthropomorphic representations, is a process of distribution of energy, materialised through 'merging with elemental and formless things' (ibid.:

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<sup>9</sup> I engage further with the animistic characteristics of trees, rivers and places among Tuvans in Chapter Three.



513-514) as well as objects which have the capacity to accumulate energy.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3:** Members of the clan walking through the smoke in order to cleanse and increase their good fortune.

Consequently, the flow of (mis)fortune, rather than being accidental and unpredictable, constitutes an integral element of a wider network of fluctuating energies that underpin human and non-human interactions. Within this system, distribution of fortune as well as harm is, on the one hand, about physical contact with different objects perceived as vessels of energies, both defined and shapeless. On the other hand, it is about peoples' capacities; for instance, the shamans' role and skills in the process of curse infliction and deflection as well as people's tendencies to think and speak ill words in order to curse their enemies. This conceptualisation of interactions between humans and spirits as embedded in flowing energies points to a wider feature of being, entrenched in perpetual fluctuation contingent on the notions of coalescence and dispersion. This, in turn, is essential for understanding the increase in curse phenomena in the wake of Soviet disintegration.

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<sup>10</sup> It is common for women who want to get pregnant to wear the underwear of particularly fertile women, or for men, to touch a successful wrestler in order to obtain some of their energy and success.

In the next section, I am going to show how, whilst being described as an instrument of survival, the proliferation of cursing in post-Soviet Kyzyl goes beyond transformations in the economic and political landscapes. Given their fluid characteristics, curses operate within dynamics of dispersion and coalescence. In this way, rather than being generated solely by spreading capitalism and commerce they are also contingent on ‘an excessive closeness and a too intense sociability’ (Harrison 1995: 84) triggered by a move from the steppe to the city.



**Figure 4:** Hovalygymaa feeding a spirit with tea and milk.

### **3. From yurts to blocks of flats: relations of social and spatial proximity**

In order to understand this process, it is essential to look at the fabric of life in Tuva through a historical lens. As outlined in the Introduction, given its complex location, the country has remained for many years in relative isolation, resisting, to some extent, influences from the outside. In terms of the local economy, before the Soviet regime, Tuva constituted a distinct combination of different pastoral practices

characteristic of Central and North Asia (Humphrey 1981: 1). Small scale, subsistence agriculture dominated farming in the region, resulting in no strong differentiation between rich and poor herdsmen. Subsequently, the nomads of Inner Asia did not frequently settle down as, for instance, farmers (ibid.: 15). Everyday life was based on the cycle of nomad dispersion and concentration. The organisational aspect of economic life in Tuva reflected the units of economic production and consumption, but this organisation was not defined by structures of domination (ibid.: 18). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tuva was characterised by geographical isolation, distance from the industrial and cultural centres of neighbouring states, and a relatively small population. There was no mechanised transport or efficient means of communication (ibid.: 3). These elements made the transition from pre-Soviet to sedentarised forms of living severe. This, in turn, had particular implications for the dynamics of sociability stemming from an excessive closeness and revealing diverse tensions. Nevertheless, during Soviet times, as often stressed by my informants, conflicts were kept at bay or quiet and everyone tried to refrain from any practices that involved shamans or spirits. More than that, people were provided with some stability and security offered by the state. After the abrupt end of the Soviet Union, everything changed and so far dormant tensions were finally fully revealed and increased.

The importance of physical space among Tuvans was explained to me by one of the first psychologists in Kyzyl, Arzaana. I met with Arzaana during the outdoor ritual organised by her clan. Her profession had yet to be fully established in the city. Indeed, she was convinced that Tuvans suffered, in particular, from inability to interact with each other in small spaces. She explained to me how, for generations, Tuvans had been taught about survival rather than about ways of dealing with other people. ‘We always used to live in small groups, scattered all over. An average Tuvan knows well how to count their animals, not how to openly address their emotions. People had been trained for centuries how to think about themselves and they are unable to interact with others in places like cities’, she concluded our discussion.

While inspired by Arzaana’s comments, I suggest that the proliferation of curses in post-Soviet Kyzyl has been entrenched in the process of moving from wide spaces imbued with scarce and diffused interactions into the city, perceived by people as a small, congested urban structure. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Tuvans

describe the dynamics of social interactions as a nexus of different fluctuating energies. Given this, shifts in spatial proximity radically changed the parameters for the flow of these energies, from widespread or dispersed in the steppe to coalescent and congested within the urban arena of the city. Revealed in this way tensions, while generally subdued during the Soviet period, escalated in the wake of the Soviet dissolution. In other words, enforcement of small distance and the corresponding intensification of social interactions, combined with the consequent changes in the dynamics of socioeconomic and political relationships led to an eruption of previously dormant or less obvious emotions and pressures. This, in turn, created the societal environment of what Sennett (1994) describes as tyranny of intimacy where ‘the closer people come, the less sociable, the more painful, the more fratricidal their relations’ (ibid.: 338), widening the spectrum of possibilities for social frictions and conflicts and thus curses. This form of ‘dangerous communications’ (Højer 2004: 58) intensified not as a result of an absence of social ties (Harrison 1995: 84), but instead as a response to an increased sociability and intimacy (ibid.) intertwined with a lack of security and control over one’s life. In order to illustrate this process, in the next sections I am going to focus on the shifts in social dynamics within the sphere of family as well as within economic and political realms in both pre-Soviet and post-Soviet times, and illuminate how the latter generate and are shaped by the phenomenon of cursing.

### **3.1. Tuvan family**

In pre-Soviet Tuva, the kinship system (i.e. relations governed by the rules of marriage and descent) was strongly patrilineal. Nonetheless, the larger units, such as clans and lineages, lost many of their functions to the administrative institutions set up by the Manchus in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Vainshtein 1981: 22). The essential productive group in Tuva was *aal*. As Vainshtein suggests, the term *aal* is problematic as it may refer to both a single yurt with a family and their animals or to a group of households. Many *aals* were composed of closely related families, mainly family of

the parents and those of their married sons and brothers.<sup>11</sup> In this way, they were the equivalent of the 'extended family' for the nomadic environment (ibid.: 243). *Aal* was classless and considered as the most efficient way of using the pastures. It was also a requirement of the nomadic pastoral way of life in these regions. Large units, as argued by Vainshtein, were mostly attributed to non-economic military factors, primarily the need to unite for defence (ibid.: 13). Of crucial importance were also patronymic groups of related families, the heads of which shared a common ancestor through the male line. Each family had its own constituting name and, apart from blood relations, they were linked by economy and ideology (cult rituals gathering the whole group near *ovaa*). Mutual aid existed between the families, for instance single mothers were never ostracised and women unhappy in their marriages were allowed to leave their husbands without any further repercussions from their families. The families could travel together or split; however, they would always remain in perpetual contact and try to stay close during migration (ibid.: 240-241).

The importance of physical closeness still deeply pervades family relations today. As one of my informants put it, living with your family is the most important thing as it always keeps people together. Indeed, I became very familiar with the importance of 'togetherness' when I moved in with my landlady, Galina. Galina was a retired widow whose husband was brutally killed two years earlier. She lived in one of the blocks closer to the city centre. When I arrived, she instructed me that we would tell everyone I was her Russian relative in order to stop people from talking. Galina spent every single day either with her neighbours or with her daughters who lived in the opposite block. She was rarely alone and my occasional craving for privacy particularly irritated her. Moreover, Galina did not like my lengthy daily trips and constant habit of disappearing for a full day. In general, she found my overall independence deeply troubling. Eventually, a friend of mine explained to me that Galina was treating me as her daughter and my lack of subordination was appalling to her. As I learned, parents and grandparents were fully responsible for making any decisions concerning their younger relatives. For instance, in the case of marriage, they

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<sup>11</sup> As Vainshtein argues, *aal* was formerly constituted in principle by agnates. However, it is reasonable to suppose that *aal* could be constituted also from a mixture of agnates, cognates and non-kin (1981: 30).

would assess the potential future husband. Every choice made by the newlyweds had to be taken with the parents. In the case of divorce, it was the parents of the daughter who would take care of any children and set the conditions. As Galina explained to me, the worst curse was to have a foreigner as a son-in-law, as the family could not trace his background and thus predict what to expect from him. In other words, he could not be investigated and this was a threat the family could not afford. Taken together, within the unit of a family there was no sense of individuality in relation to decision making. Moreover, not being able to live surrounded by the family members was associated with great misfortune.

Interestingly, the importance of family ties and a sense of familial unity reverberate, to a certain extent, with the kinship terminology. Outside of the direct paternal and maternal lineage – mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, daughter, son, and so on – Tuvans refer to what in English would be described as ‘extended family’ – cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, or nieces – simply as brothers and sisters. The only differentiation is made with regards to the side of the family relatives are from. In short, all older relatives on the female side are referred to as *daaj* (‘brothers’) and *daaj-avaj* (‘sisters’). Subsequently, all older relatives on the male side are called *akyj* (‘brothers’) or *ugbaj* (‘sisters’). All younger relatives on both female and male sides are referred to as *dungma* (‘younger sibling’). This system generates a lot of confusion among non-Tuvans in understanding to what kin relations people are referring to. For instance, Sofia’s only child, Saltyk continued to surprise me while insisting that she had 11 brothers and sisters. In a similar manner, another informant kept on stressing that all of his 25 relatives were either his brothers or sisters. Taken together, further studies of Tuvan kinship terminology may reveal some ideas about the notion of familial unity, emphasised often by my friends and informants.

### **3.2. Kinship ties in post-Soviet Kyzyl**

In post-Soviet Kyzyl, being deprived of any family ties is considered as misfortune and a possible result of curses. During my fieldwork, I became friends with Sajan, the only child of a divorced mother. He always used to say that Kyzyl was his

Paris. He was a Korean language teacher and my interests in shamanic practice usually brought a smile to his face. He loved fast cars and used to say that cars are like good horses. He once described to me why his life in Kyzyl was very difficult. Relatives would not help him and, as a single child, he was often ostracised; ‘You need family and relatives to get a job – police, government, stable secure jobs. Education is of secondary value. You can go and eat with your family, there is one meal a day you can cross out. Life in Kyzyl is difficult – a lot of gossip and backstabbing, being on your own is very hard’.

In Sajan’s opinion, Kyzylis today are focused on and entangled in their own family relations as they see only their closest relatives and concentrate on that. Perhaps this image echoes, to some extent, the notion of amoral familism, based on generations of nuclear family and lineage solidarity, common in pastoral and agricultural communities (Silverman 1968; Gilmore 1982). Indeed, family units in Tuva bear some features of a social system lacking in moral sanctions outside those of the immediate family (Silverman 1968: 2). Nonetheless, this does not imply that family relations, immediate and extended, are always characterised by warmth and safety. Indeed, in post-Soviet Kyzyl, dynamics within families, which often include neighbours, have become more complex following the move from yurts separated by distance to densely-packed blocks of flats where gossip and rumours easily operate and everyone can see and hear everything. As people live closer to each other, their lives have become more transparent and gossiping has turned into a common form of scrutiny and entertainment. In the wake of Soviet disintegration, spatial proximity has led to an increase in conflicts associated primarily with marriage and wealth as well as securing the relatives’ careers. In this way, family ties, rather than about peace, to echo Geshiere (2013), have become infused with threat that often comes from close by. Unlike in pre-Soviet and Soviet times, cursing has begun to play a key role in the navigation of escalating conflicts, which concern affines as well as blood relatives.

For instance, in post-Soviet Kyzyl, divorce and love affairs are very common and both of these processes, as opposed to pre-Soviet times, are intimately associated

with a series of curse inflictions and deflections.<sup>12</sup> The expected results often involve forcing an ex-spouse to become an alcoholic or a criminal. Interestingly, these requests are made not only by the divorcee or the parties involved, but often include the whole families, as presented in the story described by one of my informants' mother during a curse deflection ritual we participated in. The story concerned the woman's nephew, who got involved with an 'inappropriate' girl. Her behaviour was perceived as scandalous given her flair for drinking and arguing. The old lady attempted to reason with her nephew to no avail. The boy changed his phone number and ran away. One day, he appeared with a girl who was already pregnant. There was no other option but for the girl to be accepted as a part of the family. The boy started to spend all of his money on gambling, began to drink and lost all his social benefits. As it turned out, both the bride's and the groom's families could not stand the situation. As a result, during the wedding the bride's family was muttering curses, naming people and spitting so that the groom's family would suffer. The relatives of the groom asked the shaman to counter-curse. This had to remain a secret in order to stop the bride's family from re-cursing. As I was told afterwards by the shaman, these forms of interactions between two families constitute a common occurrence in post-Soviet Kyzyl when one of the families is unhappy with the future son or daughter-in-law.

Moreover, curses are often enacted as a form of revenge for unhappy marriages, lack of interest from the husband's side, or his absence and drinking. It is also common to use curse in love affairs as a form of revenge. Within this context, curses are equally popular outside kinship ties, when a woman, usually a neighbour or a colleague from work, intends to seduce someone's husband. Interestingly, single parenthood, even though considered as normal occurrence in pre-Soviet times, is perceived today as a direct consequence of cursing practices. For instance, a single mother is often described as suspicious and thought to be either mentally unstable, an alcoholic or troubling and stubborn which most likely occurred due to cursing. Conversely, before

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<sup>12</sup> As one of my informants explained, in pre-Soviet times people could leave each other if they felt unhappy. This would not trigger any conflicts, or any need for revenge or ostracism from the community.



Soviet times, as described by my informants, single or divorced mothers had usually been taken care of by their kin with no stigma or curse accusations attached.

Even though cursing usually pervades relations of affinity, in some cases it is common to employ occult practices for or against one's own blood relative. For instance, relatives (mostly elder women) prefer to visit shamans and ask them to inflict curses so that their children and other relatives could receive a promotion, get into a university, obtain relevant papers or pass exams. In other rare cases, if a blood relative decides to go against the elder's view, the rest of the family might resort to cursing. I was once told a story about a girl who decided to go against the decision of her grandparents and moved away from Tuva. She became a successful businesswoman in Moscow. Sometime later, she found herself entangled in strange legal procedures and suddenly lost her job. When she confronted the shaman, she found out her parents and grandparents had decided to curse her for not acquiescing to their decision.

Interestingly, to a certain extent, cursing within the family sphere is gendered in Kyzyl. For instance, it is primarily women who take an active role in the process of curse infliction related to love affairs as well as securing a relative's career. Men, on the other hand, are more involved in envy-based curses, with individuals enacting curse because of jealousy concerning, for example, property, a relative's wealth, and general success.

Although fear of being cursed by an ex-spouse or angry relative is prevalent among Kyzylsians, it is within the economic and political spheres that curses are expected to acquire their full potential and constitute an integral element of everyday interactions.

### **3.3. Economic relations**

In pre-Soviet Tuva, economic relations were concentrated around the household and *aal*. The household was mainly concerned with property and consumption, whereas *aal* was the basic productive unit (Vainshtein 1981: 246). Each small family had their own livestock and animal and agricultural produce, which was

consumed mainly within the family group. Pastures and certain buildings were, however, communal and a number of tasks were performed collectively, such as the pasturing of cattle, migratory removal and the watering of ploughland. Relations were egalitarian and based on reciprocity and mutual help (ibid.). In the summer, when the pastures were richer, *aal* usually joined with one or two other *aals* to form a more inclusive summer *aal* (ibid.). Individual *aals* within such a community, however, were always distinct, each being defined by the existence of a common pen for the combined flocks of sheep and goats of the member households. Summer communities were fluid and dependent on the local conditions, pointing again to the dynamics of dispersion and movement.

In the process of Sovietisation, the nomads' pasturing places were transformed into collective farms-settlements. The introduction of collective institutions of *sovkhoz* ('state farm') and *kolkhoz* ('collective farm') transformed Tuvans' lands into large-scale agricultural enterprises with hundreds of anonymous members, controlled by the local government (Humphrey and Sneath 1999). Despite subverting Tuvan ways of living, these farms continued to provide their workers with employment and food. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government retreated from funding the collective farms in Tuva and, like in many other parts of Siberia, a free market economy was introduced (ibid.). A sudden lack of state subsidies in the 1990s resulted in chaos, poverty and unemployment. Tuvans were left disoriented and confused about how to survive. The beginning of the twenty first century brought some stability; nevertheless, the possibility of supporting a family and relatives in Kyzyl through employment and regular income has remained scarce.

With the introduction of commerce, the concepts of equality and reciprocity have changed. Economic ties are based now on private property with little to no financial and job security, which makes any employment fragile and any future unpredictable. Consequently, fear and envy are the driving forces that venture to the sphere of economic relations. One of my informants, Katija, described how she was working for the police force. At one point, she became very sick and ended up having to take a long sick leave. Concerned about her health, she turned to a shaman only to find out she was being cursed by one of her colleagues who was planning to take over her position at work. The main plot of Katija's story was repeated to me in different

contexts and scenarios many times after. This type of cursing battle based on mutual fear and a need for success is a very common practice in post-Soviet Kyzyl. In short, any job is accompanied by a constant concern that someone with a lower rank is trying to take over the position. Alternatively, a promotion may be blocked by a person with a higher degree of power. The only effective way of either developing a career or maintaining one is to engage in cursing. This procedure follows a particular pattern. Person A with a higher rank is asking to curse person B so that A can keep their job. Simultaneously, A will ask for a protection ritual in order to avoid potential curses from B. B does exactly the same thing only in a reversed manner. B requests curses that would remove A from their post so that B can get promoted. Simultaneously, protection rituals are conducted in order to save B from the curses afflicted by A. These cursing battles may continue endlessly, as A and B live in a constant fear that their opponent has just requested a more powerful curse.

In summary, people in Kyzyl no longer work with a small number of members from their own or nearby *aal*, and neither are they provided with guaranteed income and work. Economic exchange happens with strangers, a few streets away from home and on a constant rather than periodic basis. From dispersed hills and pastures people have moved into a cramped matrix of streets and buildings where life has become pervaded by uncertainty and competition. The energies of (mis)fortune are no longer flowing between humans and distant places where spirits reside. They all coalesce within one bounded space of the city, which is exemplified by intensified instances of cursing, used as an instrument of basic survival. The economic relations closely overlap with the sphere of formal politics and administration as these domains offer the most lucrative and financially stable positions, including, policemen, lawyers and government deputies.

### **3.4. Political and administrative relations**

The administrative and political system of pre-Soviet Tuva was an extension of the hierarchical Manchu state, the head of which resided in Mongolia. Tuva was divided into five *khoshun*, ruled over directly by hereditary princes, each of them

having a certain number of households (Humphrey 1981: 23). There were four *khoshun* under Mongolian rule and another seven under the rule of the Manchu administration. Each *khoshun* was divided into sections called *summon*, each of which had elected officials, and these were divided further into the smallest administrative units *arban* (ibid.). The system was a military-fiscal one, with selected officials being responsible for the mobilisation of a certain number of soldiers and the extraction of a stated tax in furs from the individual households under him (ibid.: 23-24). By the 20<sup>th</sup> century both *khoshun* and *summon* had agreed territorial boundaries. Most importantly though, this system had no destructive power or influence on economic organisation or the summer communities engaging in reciprocity and exchange (ibid.: 30). In short, political and administrative relations were almost detached from the everyday happenings in *aal*.

When Tuva officially became a part of the Soviet Union in 1944 it was rapidly and fully assimilated to the economic and administrative system imposed by the Soviet regime (Forsyth 1992: 374). The administrative and political situation in post-Soviet Kyzyl has, however, substantially changed. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tuva has remained a part of the Russian Federation in the form of the Autonomous Republic of Tuva (Haywood 2010). In 1993, Tuvans adopted their own constitution, which declares their political status as a ‘sovereign democratic state in the Russian Federation’ with its own anthem and its own flag (Mongush 2006: 276). The centre of Kyzyl is mostly organised around government buildings, the national museum, and the university. As I was walking around Kyzyl, I counted sixteen different governmental and administrative institutions present in the heart of the city, such as High Court, City Hall, The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Federal Security Service, Federal Tax Office, The Ministry of the Tuvan Republic, the Ministry of Social Care and Employment and so forth. Working in and for one of these institutions provides the best positions, and comes with a high level of job and financial security. As opposed to pre-Soviet and Soviet times, these political and administrative networks are neither detached from the everyday life of the family or household nor contingent on decisions made by the state. On the contrary, they are present, both metaphorically and literally, in that many families reside in close proximity to the heart of the city and the institutions

headquartered there. Moreover, often one or more of the family members work for these institutions or know someone who does.

Given the financial and other benefits, it is the environment pervaded by the highest levels of envy. As a result, its internal dynamics remain secretive. The clients who visited the shaman I worked with would remain silent about their jobs, and it was only after they had left that the shaman would whisper to me where they came from. It was very common for them to arrive in the middle of the night, when no one could notice them. During my fieldwork, I had a unique opportunity to participate in one of the curse deflection rituals ordered by a high member of the local government. I was taken to their home in a lavish car, but my questions remained unanswered. I was struck by the luxury of their house and its drastic contrast with the other places I visited in Kyzyl. The hosts – a mother and two sisters – were deeply concerned by my presence. However, they ended up inviting me to their clan ritual during which the high profile status of these women was unnoticeable.

Within the sphere of formal politics, cursing battles, following the same pattern as in the context of economic ties, constitute a common method of acquiring and losing power. The difference lies in the immediacy and desperation of finding a strong shaman willing to engage in the mechanics of cursing for the purpose of advancing someone's political career. Indeed, there are only a limited number of highly regarded shamans in Kyzyl who are willing to produce strong curses or apply strong protections in the context of politics. As Hovalygmaa told me, the choice who the shaman is going to help is being made on the 'first to arrive' basis. The shaman cannot curse and counter-curse while working for both of the clients simultaneously. Interestingly, in her analysis of curses among the Buryats, Swancutt emphasises that local government officials would rarely be suspected of cursing. This is due to their status, secure financial means and numerous privileges which ascribes them with model behaviour (2012: 139). Conversely, in Kyzyl and Tuva in general, it is particularly the government milieu where curses would be highly suspected. For instance, the best way to secure a successful campaign is to request *kargysh-chatka* that can be inflicted on political opponents. Similarly, the possibility of maintaining power requires the mechanism of cursing battles. As Hovalygmaa told me, it is exactly the election time that she finds the most difficult and exhausting. Bridging the spheres of formal politics

and kinship, she supports only her relatives with counter-curses. Nonetheless, she often abandons Kyzyl during local government and council elections and lives in the taiga so that people will leave her alone. Indeed, it is a shared assumption among Tuvans that winning elections or securing a post is meant to be easily achieved through curses.

## **Conclusion**

Within the ethnographic context of Kyzyl, the phenomenon of cursing is embedded in a complex nexus of social as well as cosmological interactions, producing a unique platform of sociocosmic politics involving humans and spirits alike. The proliferation of cursing indisputably intertwines with political and economic shifts triggered by disintegration of the Soviet regime. This, in turn, invites the use of analytical frameworks that utilise the notion of ‘occult economies’. These frameworks associate the spread of occultism with economic transformations in post-colonial milieus approaching occultism as a discourse about the acquisition of wealth and power. However, the ethnographic context of Kyzyl illuminates how this approach, although allowing for an exploration of certain connections between curses and post-colonialism, remains reductive and omits the multivocal characteristics of cursing embedded in wider historical and cosmological traits. Given this, proliferation of curses in the context of post-Soviet Kyzyl is intertwined with, but not solely contingent on, the repercussions triggered by the end of the Soviet regime.

Conversely, it illuminates wider patterns of living in Kyzyl, often permeated by the sheer feeling of hopelessness and a lack of control over one’s existence. In this way, rather than through a general discourse of increasing material ends by magical means, cursing is conceptualised as a practical social action perceived as an instrument of basic survival in the unpredictable socioeconomic and political landscapes. Engagement with the mechanics of cursing allows to explore further how this notion of survival pertains not only to humans, but also to spirits. On the one hand, people face fears concerned with a job security and marriage while spirits, on the other hand, tackle their own concerns with isolation and economic instability.

Taken together, cursing cannot be effectively interpreted as directly triggered by the introduction of free market economy. Instead, given the perception of curses as

a part of the wider network of fluctuating energies embedded in the dynamics of dispersion and coalescence, their proliferation is contingent on an excessive closeness and sociability stemming from the shifts in spatial proximity. This, in turn, becomes visible when compared and contrasted with pre-Soviet and post-Soviet patterns of being in the sphere of family as well as economic and political realms. In this way, I suggest that the proliferation of curses does not introduce new obstacles. Rather, it manifests an intensification of fears and uncertainties which have always been there, although remained dormant and less obvious in pre-Soviet and Soviet times. The escalation of cursing practices has unveiled these challenges while increasing sociocosmic exposure to more risk.

Having introduced the basic characteristics of cursing in Kyzyl, it is essential to engage further with the mechanics of shamanic practice in Tuva, as it is the shamans who constitute central personas in the machinery of cursing; curses enacted without a shaman, while possible, are extremely rare. Given this, the next chapter moves on to the notion of shamanising in Tuva and elucidates distinct features of Tuvan shamanic practice as key for a wider understanding of occult phenomena in a post-colonial milieu.





## Chapter 2

### The artisans of curses: Characteristics of shamanic practice in Tuva

#### Introduction

In Chapter One of this thesis, I discussed how humans cannot inflict curses by themselves and how cursing constitutes a tripartite mechanism, involving the victim, the spirits and the aggressor. As presented, the spirits do not inflict curses without a price and wishing harm upon another human leads to the inflictor's suffering too, exemplified in broken limbs or an unexpected illness. Given this, in order to secure infliction of a curse that will result in particularly desired effects, such as alcoholism, job loss or sudden misfortune, and in order to ensure that the spirits will not claim further sacrifices from the inflictor, people turn to shamans. It is only they who can summon and negotiate concrete outcomes with the spirits. Moreover, it is only the shamans who can remove curses and provide protection from further harm.

Negotiations with spirits are expected to involve active and, at times, dramatic engagements; a form of creative performances with a variety of manipulative strategies ranging from subtle pleas to threats and trickery. These practises trigger fear among laymen and are expected to be fully mastered only by shamans. Consequently, shamans remain central figures in the complicated mechanism of cursing. Given this, in order to understand the phenomenon of curse in Kyzyl, it is essential to explore and describe the significance of shamanic practices in Tuva.

However, rather than approaching shamanic practice from a stance of a comprehensive theory, in this chapter and throughout the whole thesis, I concentrate on what shamans actually do during the rituals rather than what shamanism *is* or *is not* about. In short, I grasp shamanic practice as embedded in the pragmatism of everyday existence. Consequently, I present how shamanising derives from a particular ability to 'see and hear what cannot be seen and heard' (*bürülbaazyn*) which, although it

pertains to shamans and humans alike, remains cultivated by the former and feared by the latter. Along these lines, I approach the process of knowledge formation performed by shamans as an ensemble of the ways of knowing rather than a ready-to-use system of discrete facts (Townesley 1993: 452). In this way, while producing distinct knowledge on the move, shamanic practice attests to the wider conceptualisations of life in the ethnographic context of Tuva as in ‘perpetual flux’ (Ingold 2011: 72) and continuous fragility.

Engaging with the characteristics of Tuvan shamanism, in this chapter I discuss ambiguity as a feature intrinsically embedded in shamanic practice. I illuminate how cursing extends beyond moral considerations and bears ‘distinctive ontological weights’ (Pocock 1983: 46). While contributing thus to a broader understanding of occult phenomena as a part of ‘dark shamanism’ (Whitehead and Wright 2004), I focus on different stages of the shaman’s work and delineate how these incorporate both the elements of divination as well as active negotiations with spirits, based on threats, seduction and trickery contingent on sound production. In this way, I challenge the classic readings of trance and mediumship, which are usually grasped as distinct changes in physical and psychic states and show how Tuvan shamans constitute unique artisans of curses rather than being ‘passive receptacles for spirits’ (Atkinson 1992: 317).

In order to present my arguments, this chapter is split into three main sections. The first section concentrates on the process of becoming a shaman and the implications of shamanising in Tuva. Through engaging with a case study of the shaman Hovalygmaa, I discuss the notion of ‘seeing and hearing what cannot be seen or heard’ (*bürülbaazyn*) as a discrete technique of knowing and, thus, continue to apply observations regarding movement and fluidity made in Chapter One. Along these lines, I show how the realm of spirits and the realm of ‘everyday’ continuously interweave and collapse, rendering shamanising as a pragmatic mundane action described by Tuvans in Russian as ‘housekeeping’ (Rus. *uborka doma*). In the second section of the chapter, I concentrate on the notion of ambiguity intrinsically embedded in shamanic practice whilst presenting the taxonomy of shamans in Tuva. I also delineate how cursing, rather than an ethical choice, constitutes an inseparable element of the overall sociocosmological ideas. Finally, in the third section of this chapter,

while discussing different stages of the shaman's work, I illuminate the unique features of shamanic practice in Tuva and critically engage with their implications for understanding trance and mediumship at a broader scale.

## **1. What it means to be a shaman in Tuva**

It was early December when one of my closest informants Walentyna, an ethnomusicologist from the Tuvan Cultural Center, decided to help me arrange a meeting with shamans in Kyzyl whom I could interview. The process of approaching shamans without being tricked and treated as another naïve tourist was rather tedious and, at times, highly frustrating. However, one day Walentyna told me an encouraging story about a mysterious family of four shamans who used to organise little feasts for the spirits in their house during Soviet times, when the use of the drums was forbidden. Walentyna was invited to one of those unusual dinners and suggested I should introduce myself to the Kuular family, as they might be willing to help me with my research. Hovalygmaa, Olchejma, Lodoj and Damba were four shamans born in a family of six. Both parents were fierce communists. However, this did not stop the mother from passing on the shamanic gift to her children; this fact only reinforces arguments that shamanic practice does not require any personal commitment to a particular political ideology or single religious cosmology (Willerslev 2007: 138). Hovalygmaa and her siblings came from a long line of powerful shamans in Tuva. The history and origins of their shamanic powers were described in a legend that Hovalygmaa's mother heard from her mother. I had a chance to hear this story before I met the woman who became not only my prime informant, but also a dear friend.

This story describes Samdan, Hovalygmaa's great-great grandmother, who one day suddenly left her husband and children and moved to the taiga. She lost her mind and wandered among different *aals*. In one *aal* she met a shaman who revealed that Samdan was suffering from a 'shamanic illness' (*albystap aaraash*). The shaman decided to 'open the road for her' (*oruk azzydaar*) and to help her learn how to shamanise. Sadan followed her calling and became a shaman. She gave birth to eleven children. Seven of them were born with pure blood and white bones, which was meant to indicate that they had shamanic powers. Never before were so many shamans born

from one mother. When the seven siblings grew up, their father took them to the taiga and left them to be brought up by wolves. He asked the wolves to teach the children how to live in peace, how to have good thoughts and help one another. When the siblings reached adulthood, they started travelling around *aals* and fulfilling their fate through helping people as shamans. They never quarreled and became known as *Chedi-hamnar* ('The Seven Shamans'). From then onwards, among their descendants there would be at least four shamans born to each mother. Their helping spirits have always been wolves.

I was very intrigued by the story, and a week later Walentyina arranged a meeting with Hovalygmaa. A short woman in a fashionable blue dress entered the room, wearing heavy make-up and two braids. She studied me carefully and we had a brief conversation about her work. Afterwards, she gave me her phone number. 'Can you teach me some English?' she asked. As I later found out, she was very eager to learn new languages and felt she should continuously expand her scholarly knowledge. 'Yes, of course', I replied instantly. 'Ok, then you will teach me English and, in exchange, I will answer all your questions'. This was a bargain that took me on an unusual journey into a complex world of shamanic practice in Tuva.

### **1.1. *Bürülbaazyn* – knowledge on the move**

Spontaneous encounters with spirits constitute an inherent element of everyday life in Tuva and are not exclusive to shamanic practice. On many occasions, I have been told stories about people who could predict the future, or read people's thoughts or communicate with spirits by, for instance, performing songs and music while travelling through the steppe. My informants also often spoke about their confrontations with spirits during rituals and described shadows following them in their daily tasks or sleeping with them in their beds.

The ongoing interactions with spirits were usually articulated in the context of wider relationships with the landscape. This, in turn, is defined by Tuvans through the idiom of 'feeling the place' (*eskeril horrur*) or 'living' it (*amydyraar*) by means of smell (*chyt*), sight (*kööry*) and sound (*daash*). Rather than discerning individual encounters, interactions with the surroundings can be conceptualised as 'joining the

flows and movements’ (Ingold 2011: 88). Drawing on Ingold’s discussion on animistic cosmologies, in the ethnographic context of Tuva organisms and environment are not considered as isolated domains, but rather as ‘lines which intertwine and which remain constitutive of one another through perpetual mobility’ (ibid.: 69). In this way, living is not contingent on movement between discrete points, i.e. existing in locations, but about ‘occurring along the paths’ (ibid.: 83) whilst life remains continuously open-ended (ibid.: 83). Taken together, rather than through mental representations, Tuvans get to know the world by ‘moving around in their environment, whether in dreams or waking life, by watching, listening and feeling’ (Ingold 2000: 99).

In this process, the abilities to interact with spirits are sometimes described by Tuvans as ‘intuition’ (Rus. *intuitiv*) or ‘having a third eye’ (*ysh ataj*), but most commonly they are referred to as *bürülbaazyn*, which literally translates as ‘invisible’. The word *bürülbaazyn* indicates that a given person can see and hear things which usually cannot be seen or heard.<sup>13</sup> *Bürülbaazyn* constitutes a distinct technique of knowing which pertains to laymen and shamans alike; however, most likely due to a stigma surrounding the realm of spirits instigated during Soviet times, today it remains cultivated only by the latter and deeply feared by the former.

Conceptualisations of shamanic practice as contingent on a distinct skill which pertains to shamans and laypeople is not exclusive to Tuva and prevails in other ethnographic contexts in Siberia. For instance, Lavrillier (2012) describes *onnir*, a spirit charge omnipresent in the background of everyday life among Evenki. *Onnir* illuminates a specific capacity that every human is bound to have in themselves and exercise or ‘play’ with through singing, drawing or shamanising in order to perform ritual actions (ibid.: 115). The difference between a shaman and a layman lies in the degree with which *onnir* is exercised (ibid.). Similarly, while challenging depictions of ‘shamanism’ as a system of beliefs, Willerslev points to the fact that the transformation of perspectives in hunting is an activity or a technique that both hunters and shamans can master (2007: 120). What differentiates the shaman and the hunter is the degree or intensity with which they execute this technique (ibid.).

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the adjective ‘visible’ translates as *bürülbaazyn eves*, that is, lacking invisibility, which renders the notion of visibility as somehow deficient or secondary to that of invisibility, rather than the other way around.

In Tuva, the difference lies in the fact that the ability to shamanise and, thus, master *bürülbaazyn* is inherited through blood, whereas the ability to communicate with spirits and gain access beyond the ‘empirical’ realm is associated with a long-established presence on Tuvan soil and could prevail even among non-Tuvans towards whom the spirits are particularly inclined. Subsequently, shamans have the ability to control their abilities to interact with spirits as well as actively engage and negotiate with them, whereas non-shamans remain rather static receptors of particular visions. The older generations of Tuvans often argue that the arrival of the Soviets, followed by the rapid development of technology, somehow muted Tuvans ‘abilities’ to interact with spirits and to intuitively know things. For instance, one of my informants often complained how in the past, when he was visiting a village, his hosts were able to sense when he was about to arrive. Ever since cell phones came into use this ability has begun to weaken. As a result, many people prefer to have their ‘third eye’ shut or undergo cleansing rituals in order to transfer their skills to shamans. Very often these abilities are described in terms of a burden that people do not want to carry as well as a possible threat of being sent to a psychiatric hospital. Given this, in post-Soviet Kyzyl it is mainly the shamans who cultivate and master the skill of *bürülbaazyn*.

The concept of *bürülbaazyn* has also particular implications for knowledge production, including knowledge acquired and distributed by the shamans during the rituals. Once the shaman sees a cursed person, ‘an image that is received in the mind’s eye does not represent the world: it signals access to a multi-dimensional world often layered in ways that ordinary perception is untrained to achieve’ (Espirito Santo 2012: 263). Thus seeing and hearing ‘beyond’ may be perceived as being similar to what Ingold refers to as wayfaring, that is, integrating knowledge through continuously moving from one place to another rather than through the point-to-point data collection resulting in grand unification (2011: 154). In this way, shamanic practice represents what Townsley describes as ‘an ensemble of techniques for knowing rather than a system of facts known’ (1993: 452). Indeed, information shamans receive from the spirits during rituals is not about facts identified by their intrinsic attributes. These are rather things that do not exist, but occur (Ingold 2011: 154). Consequently, after the ritual they are not tabulated like data, but described to the clients like stories.

Interestingly, knowledge obtained through the means of *bürülbaazyn* evades any formal codifications, for instance in the form of a text. It is also very common for shamans to forget the content of the chants they sing and, perhaps conveniently, claim that information they often receive from the spirits evaporates soon after the shaman concludes the ritual. Thus, knowledge generated by shamans during the rituals is intrinsically ephemeral in a sense that it can disappear or escape and, as such, it is a form of knowledge in motion. Along these lines, it can be argued that shamanising rather than constituting a system of knowledge, deals instead with the distribution of knowledge (Humphrey 1996a) and involves techniques for manipulating the environment (Willerslev 2007), techniques which include tricks, threats and seduction.

In order to fully grasp the characteristics of shamanic practice in the ethnographic context of Tuva it is crucial to illuminate further how the realms of humans and non-humans are perpetually entangled and often impossible to discern from one another. As such, they produce a form of a horizontal landscape, rather than a vertical and multi-layered cosmology, complicating the ideas about ‘the supernatural’ and ‘the mundane’ worlds as discrete and isolated.

## **1.2. Between ‘supernatural’ and ‘human’**

During one of our first English lessons, Hovalygmaa decided we should visit her home. We finally arrived at a small wooden house hidden behind a blue fence. We sat for a while in the garden where Hovalygmaa lit a cigarette. ‘Look, this is the spirit of this garden, she is walking around us, right there is her *ovaa*’ she pointed to a small pile of stones. ‘Then, there is a fire spirit, he sits on a stove in there’, she pointed again towards a small cabin opposite the main house. We passed by a small corridor where Hovalygmaa’s father greeted me with a deep bow. Then, he sat down and continued to watch the news on a big TV screen as we quietly moved to the kitchen. I chose the first chair available and Hovalygmaa corrected me instantly: ‘The spirits are sitting at the table; you are in their spot right now’. I moved away quickly while trying to notice any signs of the spirits’ presence. After tea with salt and milk followed by some biscuits we went to Hovalygmaa’s room, which she shared with her sister. At the top of each bed sat a massive drum in a military bag. On the walls hung different *eerens* (tokens

and instruments used in the rituals). Hovalygmāa started to explain to me: ‘This is a hat that I always wear when removing curses, these are my protecting *eerens* and these are for the battles with spirits’. She pointed to a small orange piece of material. ‘Do you know what that is? It is a dragon. What can he do? I can kill you with it right now’, she smiled. The rest of the room was covered with cosmetics, books and jewellery. We opened the English course book and began revising the alphabet. Hovalygmāa laughed and got tired after a few minutes. Finally, I could not resist it anymore and decided to share my observations with her. ‘Do you know that I feel like I am in a number of different worlds simultaneously?’ ‘What do you mean?’ she looked at me confusedly. ‘Well, here we are in your room surrounded by your *eerens* and hats you use for cursing, with this terrifying orange dragon observing me. There are spirits feasting in your kitchen and walking through your garden while your dad is watching television and you and I are practicing how to say “how are you” in English’. She looked at me with a smile. ‘It is strange what you are saying to me. I never thought about it the way you do’.

I made a similar comment during one of the rituals when, after dispelling a very powerful curse, Hovalygmāa collapsed in a chair only to quickly engage with the client in a discussion on violence in the Russian cartoons. I told them I was impressed with their ability to emerge from one realm of spirits and curses and swiftly shift to what I defined as the ‘mundane’ sphere of everyday life. They looked at me perplexedly and admitted they had no idea what I was talking about. In a similar way, during my taxi rides with Hovalygmāa, she often vividly described her trips to Krasnoyarsk or other places and spoke about interactions with different spirits. ‘The spirits were very pleased, lots of them came to the feast, even from far away, we had a smoke’. I would always discretely look at the taxi drivers. There never was a single change in their facial expression. They were driving calmly as if Hovalygmāa had just described her holiday with friends.

These vignettes illustrate how for Tuvans interactions with spirits are not conceptualised through clear-cut differentiations between the realm of spirits and the realm of mundane, everyday life. Instead, spirits are expected to wander around streets and gardens as well as live with people in their houses. They also inhabit the landscape as spirits of locality or masters of places. Moreover, they are said to have their own



personalities, desires, and needs while actively participating in diverse processes, ranging from travelling and cooking to partaking in the production of personhood. Consequently, relationships with spirits are described as a part of everyday habits. For example, people always greet and feed masters of places at *ovaa* when travelling or when passing a tree (*bay yjash*) or a spring (*arzaan*) where spirits reside. It is also common to leave food for spirits in the flats and houses. However, these practices, although implying recognition of spirits and a form of respect, are neither considered symbolic nor ascribed exclusively to the domain of ‘the sacred’ as opposed to ‘the profane’. Instead, they are simply a part of the fabric of everyday life.

In a similar manner, shamans constantly interact with spirits, which becomes particularly noticeable when travelling with them. For instance, Hovalygmaa and I very often drove together to remote parts of Tuva for clan rituals. My friend knew where each spirit would live and often spoke about their characters and their tricks. For instance, she would say while pointing to one hill ‘this is where *Albys* lives; a terrible spirit master, she has massive breasts on her back, she is very sneaky’ or ‘I really like him, sometimes at night I go and lie there, we have a chat, I smoke a cigarette and relax’ while pointing to another mountain. Occasionally, she would abruptly stop chatting to me, put her hands together, and press against her forehead, nose and chest and bow gently. This meant she was greeting the masters of places and talking with them. As she explained, they would always inquire about different things through asking her numerous questions, such as ‘Where are you going powerful shaman? Who is there with you?’ ‘May you have a white road’, etc.

These diverse ways of interacting with spirits pertaining to laymen and shamans alike have particular implications for the ways cosmology in Tuva is conceptualised and described. For instance, when asked directly, shamans in Tuva have a clear, intellectualised construct of a cosmological system, confluent with classic descriptions of shamanic cosmologies (Eliade 1972).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, both shamans

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<sup>14</sup> This system is highly complex. Therefore, for the purpose of this chapter I provide only its basic outline. The Tuvan cosmos is split into nine cosmic subzones (*tos orannar*) organised further into three cosmic zones of the upper world (*deer oran*), the middle world (*ortaa oran*) and the underworld (*aldyn oran*). The upper worlds are populated by the dwellers of the Sky and the god *Kurbustu*. The middle world is the one where the blood is flowing and where humans live. It is governed by the god *Cher* – *Hajrakan*. Finally, in the underworld resides the god *Erlik Han* and the goddess *Alash Kadyr*, who are described as a powerful tsar and tsarina rather than deities.

and laypeople refer to the places where spirits live or come from using the word *oran* or, in Russian, *strana*, which both translate as ‘country’ rather than ‘world’. Moreover, when talking about non-humans, Tuvans refer to the aforementioned adjectives of (in)visibility or talk about things that are ‘eternal’ (*möngö*) or ‘everyday’ (*hyn-byry*), rather than differentiate between ‘the supernatural’ and ‘the human’ worlds. Given this, interactions between humans and non-humans are arranged within a distinct landscape composed of diverse ‘domains’ (Willerslev and Pedersen 2010: 265) pertaining to non-humans and humans, rather than organised in an abstract structure of a multilayered and vertical cosmology composed of discrete and separate worlds.

However, this is not to argue that the Tuvan world constitutes a homogenous whole or a totalising structure where different elements come together to produce ‘one encompassing whole’ (ibid.: 262). In order to illustrate the significance of this point, I refer to Willerslev and Pedersen’s discussion of ‘proportional wholes’ (ibid.). In their analysis, Willerslev and Pedersen show how ontologies are constructed from numerous wholes that constitute a fragile matrix of humans and non-humans in a state of disorder. These domains (rather than worlds) require constant prolongation of balance (ibid.). For instance, through practices of joking, approached as a distinct holistic social practice, cosmos becomes ‘bifurcated into parallel domains and enables people to partake simultaneously in incongruous economies’ (ibid.: 275).

In a similar manner, the relationships between Tuvan spirits and humans are continuously fragile, heterogeneous and permeated by fractions and turbulences prevailing in, for example, the phenomenon of curse. Consequently, shamans constitute central personas in the process of (un)folding the sociocosmic politics deeply pervaded by conflicts, breaks and gaps. In short, it is them, to echo Willerslev and Pedersen, who engage in a variety of ‘holistic practices’ balancing the domains of humans and spirits while confronting and provisionally (re)arranging the world the way people see it fit (ibid.: 274). Nevertheless, these practices are not conceptualised through divisions between the world of humans and the world of the supernatural. Conversely, given the integrity of spirits to the production of everyday life, shamanic practice in the ethnographic context of Tuva is considered as a mundane activity and,

as I have already mentioned, was often described to me in the Russian language as ‘housekeeping’ (Rus. *uborka doma*).<sup>15</sup>

### 1.3. Shamanic practice as housekeeping

Hovalygmaa and I spent a lot of time during our interviews in her garden, at the outskirts of Kyzyl, where she shared with me shamanic wisdom while smoking cigarettes. During one of these interviews, we were talking about being a shaman in Kyzyl when I asked her what shamanising meant to her. She looked at me and said firmly, in Russian, ‘shamanism is like housekeeping’ (*shamanism eto prosto kak uborka doma*). In short, shamans are perceived as active participants in the fabric of everyday happenings, the executors of particular kinds of social actions rather than practitioners performing in distant spiritual plateaus.

In the beginning of my research, I struggled to establish how my informants understood the connection between shamanic practice, Buddhism and influences from the Orthodox Church. Given the political attempts at transforming shamanising in Tuva into a ‘traditional confession’ (Pimienova 2013: 129) as well as considering the significant role of Tuvan shamans in the processes of cultural revivalism (ibid.: 129), I was expecting to find clear-cut definitions of what shamanic practice meant to people in post-Soviet Kyzyl. Contrary to my assumptions, most of my informants were unaware or surprised that shamanic practice was meant to be understood as religion. Instead, religious context was primarily associated with Buddhism, which was perceived as an ideology as well as a form of moral philosophy showing people how to live and what to do. Shamans, on the other hand, were described as craftsmen, dealing with everyday problems and meandering in the mundanity of people’s lives. Whilst lamas were associated with prayers and teachings, descriptions of shamanising included references to fear, something that is lived, that resides in blood, that has existed in Tuva for centuries and could provide knowledge from the ancestors.

Given the fact that curses are meant to accumulate in people in the form of mud (Chapter One), they are often associated with pollution, which requires regular

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of housekeeping was introduced along with the Soviet regime; therefore, there is no equivalent for this term in the Tuvan language.

cleansing and constitutes an intrinsic element of annual routine performed by Tuvans, especially towards the end of the year. During this time, shamans are invited to conduct particular cleansing rituals (*aryglaashkyn*) which are understood as a form of cleaning exercise (see Figure 5). These practices are described as a set of mundane tasks and are often followed by throwing away old furniture and clothes. Indeed, it is this process that has generated comparisons of shamanising to housekeeping. The shamans are also known and feared for being able to see through people, hear their thoughts as well as recognise the spirits that live in and on the victims of curses. Indeed, I always observed with curiosity how Hovalygmaa paid attention to any bruises and scars on peoples' bodies and how she studied my own body carefully every morning, leaving me with a particularly uncomfortable feeling. Crucially though, these 'occurrences' were not specific extraordinary visions, but normal observations, as if reading a diary or a bus table; 'particular instances of the everyday interpretative reading of objects rather than some extraordinary acts of hyper imagination' (Sneath 2009: 85).

Having established conceptualisation of shamanic practice as embedded in everyday, mundane activities, in the next section, while referring to Hovalygmaa, I am going to engage with further characteristics of Tuvan shamanism. I shall focus, in particular, on different aspects of becoming and being a shaman, such as initiation, training as well as the social life of shamans in Kyzyl.



**Figure 5:** The shaman assessing the amount of pollution and preparing for the cleansing practice

#### 1.4. Case study of Hovalygmaa

When I began to get to know Hovalygmaa she was very reluctant to talk about how she became a shaman (*ham*). Even though she did consider her calling as a ‘gift’ (*belek*) from spirits, she often referred to it as a burden and, given the historical context, a dangerous occupation. She worried about the future of shamanic practice in Tuva. Tuvan shamans can be male or female cognatic descendants of shamans, although it is impossible to predict which descendant will become the shaman (Stepanoff 2015: 171). Ability to shamanise prevails usually from an early stage when children see spirits playing, wandering or talking to them. Interestingly, shamanic skill is also recognised by having a piercing stare or, for instance, when children show no fear of the shaman and find the sounds of the drum and shamanic instruments particularly entertaining and joyful. Nonetheless, numerous features of shamanic practice in Tuva, such as initiation, education and inheritance of shamanic powers, echo the elements of shamanic practices described in the canonical analysis of shamanism by Eliade (1972). Consequently, shamanic initiation begins with a sudden loss of mind, coma or tormenting disease triggered by a vision of a spirit. The process of initiation, which involves physical changes in the shaman’s body, is what most explicitly separates shamans from people who can spontaneously ‘see more’ (*köörgulur*). Shamans in Tuva can have various bodily features that differ from those of non-shamans. For instance, Hovalygmaa and her siblings suffered from the rare heart condition. As she explained to me, their hearts were twenty percent bigger than a heart of an average human. This was directly associated with the process of initiation, during which the spirits prepare the shamans and their bodies to handle the advanced levels of engagement and negotiations with spirits and gods. According to Hovalygmaa, in this way the spirits prepare shamans to gain access to things that otherwise drive people mad, which resonates with Espirito Santo’s descriptions of mental illness as an excess of uncontrolled spiritual ability generating chaos in a place of information (2012: 264).

Tuvan shamans often undergo the education process in dreams when their soul splits and travels between different countries and realms while studying with spirits and deities. Education is then completed by following and learning from a more experienced shaman. Shamans in Tuva say that you become a ‘real’ (*jozulug*) shaman

once you are able to pass a final test in which you overcome your own ego. Although shamanic calling is mandatory, future shamans often attempt to change it. Hovalygmaa tried to ‘escape’ her fate by converting to different religions. She was first baptised, then became a Muslim. Despite all her efforts, the spirits would torment her and she was sick for months until she finally gave in to her calling. She was about to become a very powerful shaman and the spirits were very persistent in forcing her to follow her fate.

The strength and abilities of the shamans depend on whether they are classified as earth, sky, white or black shamans, a distinction that is contingent on the origins of their *sünezin* as well as the training they receive from the spirits. Earth shamans (*deer-danger ham*) are supposed to be fast like lightening. Their strength always comes to them immediately. When they conduct rituals they can do things, as Hovalygmaa put it, ‘right there, right now’. The summoned spirits arrive in front of them swiftly. It is easier for them to live an everyday ‘earthy’ life than for the sky shamans. They ‘fit better’, as they experience emotions similarly to laypeople. For instance, they can ‘be in love’ and ‘get on’ with other people, as well as be warmer, more empathetic and enjoy sexual intimacies more fully than sky shamans. Conversely, sky shamans (*deer kurbustu*) work in stages. They are much slower. For instance, if an earth shaman would decide to invite a sky shaman for a duel, the latter would lose, as their power would come too late. Sky shamans are colder and more withdrawn from the social interactions in everyday life. However, they are described as the experts in giving people good fortune. Finally, only a sky shaman can help *sünezin* during the trip among the realms after death and negotiate the length of the next life with the spirits and gods.<sup>16</sup>

Despite her gratefulness for becoming a shaman, Hovalygmaa often spoke of shamanising as a form of a social struggle. ‘Shamans are lonely, you serve the community, you rarely have anything for yourself’, she explained to me. ‘Also, what if Soviet times happen again? We do not want to be reborn then as shamans’. During my fieldwork, I was particularly intrigued by the social life of the shaman. Even though they were considered as people of the highest authority, they were also widely feared,

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss this process in more details in Chapter Three.

which limited their opportunities for social interactions. I was particularly struck by my friend's uneasiness when I asked her to come with me to a nearby coffee shop. Hovalygmaa and I usually met in her house or in one of the rooms of the Cultural Centre. She did not enjoy being seen in public and always insisted on having our meetings in rather discreet places. 'Shamans do not go for coffees. We do our work and spend the rest of the time at home', she explained to me. However, one day we particularly struggled to find free space and I managed to convince my friend to take a walk down the streets. As we were passing by the shops along the main street, I noticed her increasing lack of confidence and a sort of anxiety. People who recognised her were crossing over and Hovalygmaa urged me to find a free coffee shop. Once we got inside, the owner gave us a suspicious look. We sat in the corner and tried to talk. Hovalygmaa stood up after fifteen minutes and asked to leave. After this incident, I discovered that the unexpected presence of a shaman always triggers fear and uneasiness. It is common for people to talk about them anxiously as those who deal with mysterious powers and whose path should not be crossed. As Hovalygmaa explained it, she is familiar with a lot of stories and she knows the secrets and struggles of a lot of people. Seeing her in the street therefore makes other Kyzylis uncomfortable.

Even though shamanic practice is commonly associated with cure and the establishment of order, shamans are deeply ambiguous personas, both feared and admired. Very often I was warned against shamans and their ambiguous skills, their tendencies to make jokes as well as to trick people and steal their energies or inflict on them particular maladies. This intrinsic ambiguity of shamanic practice has particular implications for understanding of the mechanics of cursing as well as wider dynamics within Tuvan cosmology, and dovetails with the conceptualisations of life as perpetually fragmented, fragile and unstable. In the next section, I show how cursing, described often in anthropological studies as a part of 'dark shamanism' (Whitehead and Wright 2004), in the ethnographic context of Tuva remains an intrinsic element of the overall sociocosmological ideas, instead of constituting an ethical choice or moral descriptor.

## 2. Shamanic practice: an intrinsic ambiguity

Shamanic practices are very often conceptualised through their diverse healing functions as a vital service to the community (Whitehead and Wright 2004; Willerslev and Pedersen 2010; Humphrey 1999; Swancutt 2012). Consequently, within shamanic studies the analytical emphasis is often placed upon the positive, therapeutic and socially integrative dimensions of shamanising. Nonetheless, the shamans have a dual capacity to both kill and cure which renders them as morally ambiguous persons. In many ethnographic settings, the skills to cure and kill are differentiated and looked at through a prism of dichotomies, such as darkness and lightness (see, for example, Wright 2004; Heckenberger 2004; Strathern and Stewart 2016), or defined as horizontal versus vertical shamanic practice (Hugh-Jones 1996). Power to inflict harm might be associated with the shamans' inability to exercise self-control and master emotions and aggressive desires (*ibid.*). It can also stem from an excess of agency resulting from being overtaken by the perspectives of spirits and animals, that is, a transformational process which is associated with witchcraft (High 2012). It may also derive from mastery of mythology and knowledge of spells deployed (Buchillet 2004). However, the capacity to kill is used only in exceptional circumstances given the assumptions that any harm done always comes back (Buchillet 2004; Pedersen 2011).

In the ethnographic context of Tuva, shamanising thrives on an ambivalence that pertains to both shamans and spirits alike. The curing and killing abilities constitute 'complementary opposites rather than antagonistic possibilities' (Whitehead and Wright 2004: 3) and the same set of practices that can heal the client are also employed in order to inflict curses.<sup>17</sup> This, in turn, illuminates important ethnographic confluences between Siberian and Amerindian shamanism. As presented by Fausto (2004), what prevails in Western thinking is a desire for moral standards, based on the assumption that there must be 'good and bad, both a light and a dark side and a clear-cut frontier in order to demarcate a basic contrast of ethic' (*ibid.*: 172). As Fausto argues, there are no such dichotomies in South American shamanism (*ibid.*) and neither are there in Siberian shamanic practice (Swancutt 2008; Kara and Kunkovacs 2014; Sychenko 2016). Indeed, in Tuva, the integration of the ambiguity of shamanic

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<sup>17</sup> I discuss this process in more details in Chapter Four.



skills remains essential to the understandings of the efficacy of shamanic practice overall and spiritual and cosmological ideas in general. Given this, shamanic practice is about acting upon the world through cure, but also through ability to curse, disturb and kill. To echo Atkinson, Tuvan shamans' work is about 'the coherence and viability of their patients' being, the continuity of a community, or the well-being of a household, however, their assertion of control through rhetoric of order are as significant as their flirtations with chaos and anarchy' (Atkinson 1996: 319). Most importantly, in Tuva, the abilities to inflict and deflect curses are not directly associated with any discrete categories of shamans, for instance, 'black' (*kara*) or 'white' (*ak*), and do not impose, at the same time, any particular ethical considerations. In this way, Tuvan taxonomy of shamans illuminates how the words 'black', 'white' and 'evil' (*aza*) can bear ontic rather than moral implications (Pocock 1983).

## **2.1. What is 'black' and 'white' in Tuva**

The meaning of the categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' as associated respectively with harming and curing powers is discussed, in the context of Siberia, by Eliade (1972). While describing the characteristics of Altai shamans, Eliade argues that classifying shamanic practices within the categories of black and white shamans is, in fact, merely a practical organisation of different powers deprived of any discrete associations with harming or curing abilities (ibid.: 186). Echoing Eliade, in her ethnographic accounts, Swancutt mentions how the Buryats make a basic distinction between black shamans, who invoke the spirits of deceased black shamans or the sky; and white shamans, who invoke the Buddhist deities or the spirits of deceased white shamans without ascribing the particular harming skills to any of the categories (2008: 851). On the example of curse infliction ritual in Khakassia Sychenko shows how the term 'black' is not pointing to ethical oppositions between 'good' or 'bad', but simply describes shamanic skills and powers (2016). Similarly, Kara and Kunkovacs illuminate how in the Altai region the Telengit people turn to black shamans in order to be cured from serious, especially mental, diseases rather than directly associate black shamanising with 'black magic' (2014: 154), that is, harm.

As mentioned earlier, shamans in Tuva can be described as sky or earth. In addition to these, they can be also classified as black (*kara*) and white (*ak*), leading to different combinations between the four groups. For instance, Hovalygmaa was a black and sky shaman, her brother Lodoj belonged to black and earth shamans whilst her sister, Olchejma, was a white and sky shaman. In essence, cursing is not associated in particular with any of these categories. Interestingly, there is a significant distinction in the way laypeople and shamans describe the differences between black and white shamans. Among Kyzylins, black shamans are associated with the whole machinery of cursing, which involves not only the infliction of curses but also deflection and protection. White shamans are often meant to be the ones who are working with the dead, who are concerned with astrology and good fortune. Interestingly, the distinction between whiteness and blackness tends to be associated further with lamas and shamans, presenting the former as from the ‘white pole’ (Rus. *belyj poljus*) and the latter from ‘the dark pole’ (Rus. *chjornyj poljus*). Finally, the category of ‘blackness’ is often used to explain or conceal what is not known, what is mysterious and thus causing fear or what should not be revealed. Conversely, the shamans offer a very clear definition of the roles of black and white shamans in Tuva. In short, black shamans (*kara hamnar*) are the ones who are expected to be experts in detecting, inflicting, and deflecting curses. Moreover, black shamans have exclusive powers to conduct negotiations with *Erlik*, the spirits of the underworld who often need to be tamed and encouraged to provide help and protection for people. Black shamans always suffer and sweat when singing *algys*, the shamanic chants, which last at least twenty minutes and are accompanied by regular drumming. They also sing their *algys* in deep strong tones and their faces look older and worn out at the end of the ritual. Their shamanic coats are heavy and challenging to wear in the heat. Finally, it is harder for black shamans to give people good luck (*aac-kezzik*).

In Tuva, there are nine ‘layers’ of good luck that shamans can provide. The basic ones include family, a place to live, good health and food. Another three are concerned with careers, money and general prosperity. The final two are, as described by Hovalygmaa, the ‘extra credits’ that can be taken onto the next life. Black shamans can provide only seven of these layers. All nine of them can only be offered by white shamans (*ak hamnar*). White shamans can also cast and inflict curses however, their

‘expertise’ lies in conducting the death rituals of seven and forty-nine days,<sup>18</sup> assisting *sünezin* in their trips between different realms and negotiating the length of the following lives. Finally, only a white shaman can guarantee that *sünezin* will be reborn as a human in the next life. Unlike black shamans, white shamans have lighter coats and their voices are softer. While conducting rituals, they appear to be less tired and drum effortlessly.

Thus, although black and white shamans do have particular characteristics, their powers are not easily differentiated according to the abilities to curse and cure. Similar ambiguity prevails among the spirits, who can simultaneously carry curses and harm people as well as provide help and assistance in particular contexts.

## 2.2. Tricky spirits

The pantheon of deities and spirits in Tuva includes gods who are not expected to interfere with people’s existence. It simultaneously includes spirits and masters of places who are constantly entangled in people’s everyday lives. As discussed in Chapter One, there are particular groups of spirits who are responsible for spreading curses on behalf of the shamans and at the request of an inflictor. These spirits, along with others, belong to the group of *aza* spirits, which is translated as ‘evil’; nonetheless, this does not necessarily have any moral implications. In order to fully grasp the characteristics of Tuvan spirits it is essential to illuminate the ways in which their actions are being described.

Indeed, their doings are never defined as causing suffering due to harmful desires. Rather, spirits’ actions occur as a result of them having a concrete ‘job’ (*azjyl*) to ‘disturb’ (*üreer*) people. Subsequently, shamans constantly stress the fact that all spirits require respect and should be acknowledged. Finally, *aza* spirits, although expected to provide disturbance, assist shamans and people in particular circumstances. For instance, small *Erlik* spirits, who are supposed to create fear in people and prevent them from uncovering secrets, are simultaneously an essential

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<sup>18</sup> Seven days ritual (*chedi honuk*) takes place a week after one’s death and commences *sünezin*’s journey from one life into the next one. Forty-nine days ritual (*dorten tos honuk*) concludes this process and marks the rebirth of *sünezin* in the new life.

support for the shaman in death rituals. For instance, in rare cases of exhumation, *Erlik* are called in order to calm down the ‘thoughts and emotions of the deceased’ (*sagysh satpaa*), which might be still lingering around the body. *Chetker* spirits responsible for cursing (Chapter One) are, concurrently, playing the crucial role of protectors in death rituals. They are the guardians of the household of the deceased and ensure that the living relatives are protected from the *süinezin* of the dead who will try to claim more lives.

The pantheon of *aza* spirits includes further *Dinger* spirits. *Dinger* offer happiness, wealth and love to people; however, they always demand something in return. People who interact with *Dinger* are described later as millionaires in worn out clothes who wander lost and confused and can be seen especially in small villages. They always smell bad, wear only one shoe, and never cut their nails. This happens because the clients of *Dinger* often become suddenly rich, however, there is a price to pay for their luck. If *Dinger* spirits offer love instead of money, then people are expected to lose their mind, as this allows the spirits to feed off their energy and happiness.

Finally, there are also *Albys* and *Shulbus* spirits, who are working with ‘what is negative in people’ (Rus. *shto plohoje v ljudiah*) and become particularly active in the third part of the day when the red ‘bloody’ (*hanna*) sun is setting behind the mountains. It is a very dangerous part of the day as, in Tuva, nights ‘open everything up’ (Rus. *vsjo otkryvajut*). For instance, Walentyina told me a story about her relative who got possessed by an *Albys* when she kept her mouth wide open at that particular moment of the day.

Ambiguity as a feature prevails not only among *aza* spirits. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Tuvan landscape is heavily populated by spirit masters and spirits of locality. Even though they are expected to share good fortune and wealth with humans, they often are described by the shamans as moody and capricious, enjoying joking and tricking people. Their changes in attitude can affect people spending time or living nearby and cause harm or misfortune. Finally, according to Hovalygmaa each spirit of locality can claim three human lives in order to surround themselves with spirit children.

Thus, as I have shown here, abilities to curse and harm are neither associated

with the categories of black or white shamanising nor has the term ‘evil’ moral connotations linked directly with causing suffering. Furthermore, ambiguity is deeply embedded not only in shamanic practice, but also in the characteristics of spirits. Consequently, cursing is not understood as a marker of moral excellence, but remains an integral element of sociocosmic dynamics. Instead of constituting a form of moral descriptors pointing to what people should or should not do, the words, such as ‘black’ and ‘white’ have, to echo Pocock’s argument about the use of the word evil (1983), ontic implications, differentiating what things are and what they are not (ibid.: 46). In this way, rather than being grasped within the framework of ethics, cursing and ambiguity become essential to the overall understandings of spiritual and cosmological ideas in Tuva as well as to the characteristics of sociocosmic interactions.

Having established the links between cursing and shamanic practice outside the context of morality, in the final section of this chapter I am going to focus on the unique features of shamanism in Tuva, in particular the conceptualisations of trance and mediumship among Tuvan shamans. Whilst describing diverse stages of shamanic practice in the presence of curses, I am going to show how shamanising constitutes, in fact, an ‘art to exert’ (Hamayon 1996: 79), an art which involves seducing, negotiating and tricking the spirits. In this way, I present the shamans as active artisans of curses, rather than ‘passive receptacles for spirits’ (Atkinson 1992: 317).

### **3. The artisans of curses: Unique features of shamanic practice in Tuva**

Sulchuk was a short woman in her early thirties, working for the local government. Like many Kyzylins, she was struggling with job security as well as promotion opportunities. We met for the first time in Hovalygmaa’s office, situated in a wooden shed right next to the shaman’s house. Inside, there was a large sofa designated for the visitors, a stove and the shaman’s chair. Sulchuk, like all clients, called Hovalygmaa’s cell phone when she arrived at the gate. She was wearing a summery white coat, high-heeled shoes and smiled enthusiastically. Hovalygmaa sat on her chair and, as usual, crossed her legs, lit a cigarette and closed her eyes, asking Sulchuk to begin her story. The woman was deeply concerned about her financial future and expressed concerns about her inability to climb the ranks at her job. The

shaman opened her eyes and pointed to Sulchuk's stomach saying she could see a lot of mud (*hir*) and that the woman was suffering from a powerful curse. She suggested that Sulchuk should request a cleansing ritual and that they should meet again in a few days. Sulchuk agreed and the shaman dictated a list of items she had to prepare for the ritual. Finally, the woman thanked the shaman and offered to pay 300 rubbles (approximately three pounds) for her advice.

The shaman and I arrived at Sulchuk's flat, situated in the city centre, a few days later. Hovalygmaa asked me to carry the drum to the second floor of one of the numerous grey blocks of flats in the street. Sulchuk welcomed us in her kitchen where we found some food on the table. Her daughter played in the room next to us and showed little to no interest in our presence. When the shaman finished eating, we moved to the living room where I made myself comfortable on the sofa, one of the only two pieces of furniture in the room. The shaman took Sulchuk's fingers and put on them five different threads. Next, she cut the threads and asked Sulchuk to carefully throw them away using special brass claws and wearing a hat turned upside down in order to mislead the spirits. Then, both women took a piece of red material which they cut into strips. 'The spirit is cold and needs to be dressed up', the shaman explained to me. The material was burnt afterwards and the ashes were thrown away from the balcony. Next, the shaman sat on a chair and began drumming and singing. We sat in silence as Sulchuk put her hands closely to her face as if praying. Halfway through the ritual, the shaman paused and revealed that Sulchuk was, in fact, suffering from five different curses that were inflicted on her by the same woman, an envious colleague. She also informed us that there was a spirit with us in the room, which had been lingering in the flat for days and looking nastily at Sulchuk's daughter. Before Hovalygmaa recommenced drumming and singing, she asked us to concentrate on our wishes. Then, she resumed singing while still sitting on the chair. The shaman's voice was ranging from loud howls to gentle humming and after another ten minutes she collapsed exhausted on the sofa. Much to my surprise, the shaman did not lose consciousness, fall on the floor or make any gestures that would suggest changes in her physical and psychic state and thus indicate she was in trance. Instead, Hovalygmaa simply concluded the ritual by telling Sulchuk how to protect herself and avoid further curses. She also confirmed that the spirits inflicting curses on behalf of

Sulchuk's colleague were particularly nasty and did not want to leave. Sulchuk listened carefully and finally bowed deeply and offered the shaman 3000 roubles (approximately thirty pounds). After we left, I asked the shaman about what happened during the ritual and why she did not look as if travelling to different realms or being in trance. The shaman gave me a clearly irritated look: 'We do not roll on the ground like crazy, this is the show for the tourists', she delicately told me off.

In the early stages of my fieldwork, on numerous occasions I was told by the shamans that they are never possessed by the spirits and spirits do not try to speak to people whilst using the shamans' bodies. Moreover, rather than undertaking journeys to diverse realms, the shamans invite spirits to the place of the ritual in order to negotiate with them. Negotiations are then conducted by means of diverse sounds that are produced through drums, the shaman's voice as well as shamanic instruments. This, in turn, has certain implications for the characteristics of shamanic practice in Tuva, including divinatory techniques as well as mediumship and trance.

### **3.1. Divination techniques**

In Tuva, the quality of being a shaman is something that is hidden within the body, in particular the shaman's voice. The efficacy of shamanic work remains contingent on sound production. Unlike other ethnographic contexts in Siberia (Humphrey 2007; Pedersen 2007; Ellis 2015), among Tuvan shamans significantly less attention is given to the role of shamanic costume and diverse tools (with the exception of a drum) as a way to establish contact with spirits or obtaining information. Instead, shamans claim that most of the time they can work without wearing a costume whilst their divinatory techniques do not require any instruments, such as cards, stones or bones. Indeed, during a preliminary divinatory meeting, which constitutes the first step in the shaman's work, Tuvan shamans rarely use any classic divination mechanisms, such as readings of cast objects or esoteric texts in order to reveal the causes of cursing. A client is visible to the shaman in a way that the shaman can often instantly recognise the presence of curses through noticing pollution or spirits around or in the client's body. Given this, it is the clients themselves, rather than particular objects, such as cards or stones, who resemble metonymic fields, that is, 'fields for the projection of

narrative or devices that invite the attribution of pattern and interpretative narrative' (Sneath 2009: 79). Instead of seeking information by means of material objects as well as through eliminating a 'rich field of possibilities for evocative association' (ibid.: 85), during initial divination the shamans are immediately presented with the sought knowledge in the form of visions.

Moreover, outside of the ritual contexts in which shamans fully rely on the power of sounds, both those produced by the drum and the shaman's voice, interactions with spirits can occur through the means of (in)audible talks accompanied by concrete visions. While spending time with Hovalygmaa, I often noticed when she was unsure of something and, whilst pointing her finger to the sky, how she was in a silent conversation with the spirit in order to obtain information. These forms of interactions would happen on a regular basis, in a taxi, in her garden, during our English classes and especially during our trips to the countryside. Most importantly though, they always occurred in informal contexts or when the shaman required a piece of 'personal' information, for instance while cooking and completing her recipe.

The process of obtaining further details regarding the client's condition after a preliminary divination exercise always takes place during the ritual and thus it requires the power of sound, crucial to any events contingent on change and negotiations. Through uttering diverse sounds, singing and drumming the shaman invites additional spirits to arrive or reveal themselves in the scene.<sup>19</sup> This gives the shaman the opportunity to establish further sources of harm as, for example, in the case when the shaman noticed a spirit watching angrily Sulchuk's daughter. Thus, sounds in the ethnographic context of Tuva constitute the essential vehicle of the shaman's power (Townsley 1993: 449) and are key in the process of concluding divination.

Attribution of shamanic powers to sounds and, in particular, shamanic voice is intimately intertwined with other unique features of shamanic practice in Tuva, including the perceptions of trance and mediumship. In short, as described in the aforementioned vignette, Tuvan shamans claim they never fall into trance during the rituals.

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<sup>19</sup> I discuss this in depth in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.



### 3.2. Shamanic practice without trance

In classic approaches to shamanic practice, techniques of shamanising have been described in terms of possession, as incarnation of spirits or as ecstatic and mystic journeys to the Under and the Upperworld (see, among others, de Heusch 1981; Eliade 1972). Establishing communication with non-humans has been grasped as contingent on falling into trance, which includes trips to other worlds interwoven with the ability to invite spirits in order to establish contact with the clients through the shaman's body (Humphrey 1996b) while adopting or submitting to the spirit's perspective (Willerslev 2007; Holbraad and Willerslev 2007). These processes are often exemplified in radical alternations in the states of consciousness.

By contrast, shamans in Tuva never talk about travelling to the places where spirits reside. Moreover, the clients do not interact with spirits directly through the mediumistic body of the shaman, although, if the shaman's work is particularly efficient, the clients might physically feel the spirits' presence in a form of a cold wind or distant murmur or, rarely, catch a glimpse of them. In addition, shamans do not lose their consciousness or exhibit the typical features of falling into trance, such as speaking odd languages, falling on the ground or rolling their eyes. Nevertheless, they retain their role as mediators between humans and non-humans and have access to the realms which lay beyond the perception of laymen. How can we then analytically grasp what occurs during the ritual without dismissing the shamans' rejections of trance as an intrinsic method of shamanising?

The use of the terms 'mediumship' and 'trance' triggers specific descriptive and analytical problems, often echoed in the comments made by my informants when confronted about diverse techniques of shamanising. Unquestionably, the shamans in Tuva do mediate between clients and spirits whilst engaging in interactions that exceed the cognitive experiences of non-shamans. How then can one grasp my informants' assertions that genuine shamans never fall into trance? As stated by Hamayon (1993), the word 'trance' is often absent from indigenous languages due to its Latin roots: *transire* means 'to die, to go beyond, to pass from one state to another' (ibid.: 21). Following on from that, Hamayon challenges the applicability of terms, such as 'trance' and 'ecstasy', in the analysis of shamanism. Instead, she argues that rather

than with a system of representation in which every gesture and movement that shamans perform points to a concrete psychic or physical state (ibid.: 22), the shaman's behavior during the rituals is commonly associated with active forms of producing relationships with spirits. Moreover, as stated in other works (Tsintjilonis 2006; Lewis 1971), there are a variety of afflictions which include trance, nevertheless, do not involve any alternations in the physical or mental states of the person affected.

Following on from that, there is no word for trance, spirit possession or mediumship in the Tuvan language, and Tuvans often object to such interpretations, taking some of them even as a slight offence. Consequently, relations with spirits do not conform to trance, revelation or moments of ecstasy – that is, they are not exceptional in this sense. Instead, as mentioned earlier, the shamans undertake lengthy and often dramatic negotiations, conducted primarily through the means of sounds. These sounds both irritate and excite the spirits while forcing them to give in to the shamans' requests. However, their responses and willingness to work with the shamans are exclusively contingent on how the shamans can manage this soundly diversified landscape and adjust their voice. Such techniques echo, for example, Amerindian shamanic practices, where shamans can heal their patients through songs as the spirits are attracted by the aesthetics of the music (see Hugh-Jones 1996; Gow 1996), or when songs become distinct shamanic paths (Townesley 1993). Nevertheless, there is no sense of 'other-becoming' (Arhem 2016b: 293) among the shamans in Tuva, understood as the appropriation of the spirits' perspectives as in the context of Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 1998) or spirit possession as in Southeast Asian shamanism (Arhem 2016b).

In a rather different way, the shamans in Tuva never allow the spirit to overtake their bodies and use it as a vessel. Interestingly, sudden physical movements intended to represent the instances of trance or spirit possession, such as falling on the ground or spitting, are immediately dismissed by shamans, and ordinary people perceive them as a part of 'shamanshow'. For instance, Hovalygmaa once described to me how she felt deeply offended by the work of the shaman and chairman at *Adyg-Eeren* society, who was performing a ritual for a big group of tourists from the West. 'I observed him rolling on the floor and spitting all over his mouth. The audience was impressed; I could not help but laugh. After the show, I pulled him back and asked why he was

trying to fool those people', she told me, smiling widely.

As discussed in the case of Sulchuk, the shamans communicate with spirits, manipulate and trick them through the means of sounds. This communication constitutes an immediate (re)action, an active response situated in a given moment, rather than a discrete technique transmissible 'in contexts outside of those of its practical applications' (Ingold 2000: 25). The shamans constantly modulate and adapt their voice and drumming in order to please or scare the spirits and thus ensure curse removal or infliction. In this way, echoing Hamayon's argument (1993), the shaman's actions, centred around the production of sounds, constitute a creative process of voicing into being a fragment of sociocosmic drama that brings together spirits and humans. Consequently, real shamans are considered unique artisans of sociocosmic politics rather than passive 'receptacles for spirits' (Atkinson 1992: 317). In this way, shamanic practice in the ethnographic context of Tuva challenges the understandings of shamanising as involving significant and noticeable alternations in the states of consciousness, contributing thus to conceptualisations of trance and mediumship in the anthropological studies overall.

## **Conclusion**

Shamans in Tuva constitute central personas in the process of (un)folding sociocosmic interactions, which entails humans and non-humans alike and which is exemplified in curses. Therefore, in order to understand the phenomenon of cursing in Kyzyl it is essential to grasp what shamanising in Tuva is about. Given this, in this chapter I have discussed the characteristics of Tuvan shamanic practice.

As I have shown, shamanising among Tuvans is embedded in a particular skill of seeing and hearing what usually cannot be heard or seen (*bürülbaazyn*). As such, it constitutes a technique of knowing rather than a system of knowledge, thus attesting, to the fluid and mobile characteristics of life in Tuva in general. Consequently, given the fact that spirits are said to constitute an integral element of everyday existence among Tuvans, shamanic practice is described within a rhetoric of mundane practicality, such as housekeeping, rather than associated with the 'supernatural' milieu.

Along these lines, while concentrating on the notion of ambiguity intrinsic to shamanic practice and cursing itself, I have discussed in this chapter how the word ‘evil’, as for instance ‘evil spirits’, and the expression ‘dark/black shamanism’, rather than functioning in opposition to the terms ‘good’ and ‘white’, in fact complement a given cosmological setting while having ontic instead of moral implications.

Concluding my analysis with the unique features of shamanic practice, such as particular divinatory techniques and the importance of sound production, I have shown how Tuvan shamans represent creative artisans or virtuosos of curses, whose work is embedded in often dramatic negotiations. In this way, shamanic practice in the ethnographic context of Tuva allows us to reconfigure our understanding of different shamanic techniques, including the significance of concepts like trance and mediumship.

As discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis, the mechanics of curses in most cases require the presence of the shaman and the help of spirits. Nevertheless, in order to fully grasp the implications of cursing, it is essential to delineate what happens to the third participant in this drama - the victim of curse infliction - and how he or she experiences these curses. This experience expands and reflects a particular understanding of personhood. Given this, in the next chapter, I focus on the concept of human personhood among Tuvans and discuss how its construction is partially contingent on and interwoven with the mechanics of cursing, producing a distinct way of being a human.

## Chapter three

### Cursed person(hood)

#### Introduction

My informants often used to say to me that there are no curses without shamans and humans. In the previous chapters, I have introduced the phenomenon of cursing and discussed the characteristics of shamanic practice as central to the mechanics of curse. In this chapter, I focus on the final element of this tripartite system and explore firstly, what it means to become a human being as opposed to other kinds of persons in Tuvan ontology. Secondly, I illustrate how this process is shaped by and continually intertwines with instances of cursing. Along these lines, while engaging with the notion of personhood, I show how humans are constructed from multiple layers organised around a centre – *sünezin* ('soul'), producing thus a distinct concentric structure. I delineate how this process emerges from a matrix of complex interactions which reverberate with previous lives whilst being contingent on the characteristics of spirits and the lives of relatives and ancestors. In this way, I shall discuss how personhood is equally conceived of in a cosmocentric way, bringing together spirits and humans in a relationship of complementarity rather than representation.

Engaging with the characteristics of becoming a human being, in the second part of this chapter I seek to show what can be learned about Tuvan personhood through the phenomenon of curse and curse rituals. In short, I illuminate how curses bring the concepts of 'body' (*et-bot*) and 'soul' (*sünezin*) together in an explicit fashion, allowing for the rethinking of these notions in a way that, firstly, avoids flattening them into bounded, discrete substances, such as spirit and matter, prevailing in the Cartesian concepts of the autonomous 'self', 'individual', etc. (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 9); and, secondly, enables us to engage with the particularities of being a human as opposed to other kinds of persons in the ethnographic context of Tuva.

In my analysis, I concentrate on how cursing induces 'bodily' changes which engage physical, emotional and cognitive processes, whilst shifting humans from a

fragile condition of 'homeostasis' (Cannon 1932: 24) to turbulence. I put a specific stress on the images of cursed bodies and physical deformations that the shamans produce while conducting divination practices and curse deflection rituals. In my analysis of the materiality of curses, I draw on Latour's argument concerning bodily existence as 'learning to be affected' (2004: 205). In this way, while discussing the shamans' visions, I approach a (cursed) body not as a 'provisional residence of something superior - an immortal soul, the universal, or thought - but (...) a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of' (ibid.: 206). While concentrating on the bodily images of curses, I do not argue that the Tuvan concept of personhood is predicated upon the trichotomies of body, mind, and soul as these categories do not pervade Tuvan imagery in the form of independent, isolated concepts. Whilst cursed bodies provide concrete images of curses, they do not constitute bodies abstracted from the social situation in which bodily acts are involved (Bird-David 2004: 333). Rather, they are part of the overall evidence of the presence of a cursed person(hood). Along these lines, I seek to illuminate how curses transform people into a particular stage, upon which complex interactions between humans and non-humans are instantiated and played out. Thus, I briefly propose that cursed personhood in Tuva, rather than utilising the perspective of spirit possession or anything resembling it, can be approached from the angle of living with and around spirits.

The chapter is split into two main sections. The first section focuses on the characteristics of being a human as opposed to other kinds of persons and, thus, acquiring a particular concentric structure of personhood. Along these lines, it explores how different layers within this structure, whilst interdependently linked around a centre, come together in order to produce sociality. In the second section, I illustrate my discussion with an ethnographic example of cursed person(hood) and show how curses induce overall disturbance in the victims while, concurrently, transforming them into a locus of sociocosmic relations. In this way, they produce concrete images of (de)formed bodies.

## Terminology

The definitions of the terms ‘self’, ‘person’, ‘personhood’, ‘individual’, and ‘dividual’ have been the subject of numerous discussions in a variety of anthropological debates (among others, see Strathern 1988; Bloch 2011; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Smith 2012). The Tuvan language does not offer any direct equivalents to these terms and the condition of being a particular kind of person, i.e. human or non-human, is contingent on a variety of factors. In order to avoid unnecessary entanglements in abstract terminology, I primarily use the Tuvan terms, such as *kizji* (‘human being’), *amytan* (‘animal’), *eezi* (‘masters of places spirits’), and *sünezin* (‘soul’) in order to elucidate the relationship between being a human and being a person in Tuvan cosmology. Thus, I engage with the characteristics of acquiring a particular kind of (cursed) personhood. I employ the term ‘human personhood’ (Arhem 2016a: 10) as a methodological tool to interpret what my informants described as a multi-layered structure, characteristic only of human beings.

### 1. Cosmocentric personhood

When you arrive in Kyzyl, you cannot help but notice two cemeteries; one situated on the hill just on the left side of the gate to the city, and the other in the heart of the capital. The first one is separated from the rest of the territory by a ditch carved into the ground. The other remains cut off from any unwanted observers with a high metal fence. Both of these places were of great interest to me, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork. Prior to my trip, I read about notorious conflicts between Russians and Tuvans due to the Russians’ tradition of putting photographs of the deceased on the tombstones, a practice which terrified Tuvans and resulted in the repeated destruction of the cemeteries. Filled with adventurous excitement, I encouraged a few of my friends to come with me to visit either of the two places. They welcomed my proposition with horrified expressions, and pondered why I would want to do such a thing. Indeed, among Tuvans, images and thoughts of the dead trigger a particular fear and, consequently, the deceased are meant to be forgotten and not spoken about after the forty-nine days’ mortuary ritual which concludes the process of

being reborn into a new life.<sup>20</sup> My friends' reactions and the overall panic produced by the existence of the photographs led me to wonder about the significance of the physical body and physical presence in Tuva in general. I wanted to know what happens to the body after people die. Surprisingly, most of my informants gave me a perplexed look and talked about *sünezin* or, when asked about the burial practices, shrugged their shoulders and said, 'we bury them like in the Orthodox Church'. In a similar way, the shamans I worked with, when asked how people die, tended to describe in detail a complex process during which *sünezin* travels to different 'countries' before being reborn after forty-nine days. When repeatedly questioned about the body, even with the help of my translator, who eventually grasped the essence of my enquiries, the shamans seemed not to understand what it was that I so eagerly wanted to know. This initial vagueness that appeared to surround my questions about corporeality and physicality led me to a more thorough engagement with the idea of personhood and the ways people talk about themselves as humans (*kizji*).

The notion of personhood in Tuva, often skewing towards the issue of identity, has constituted one of the central themes in the anthropological treatments dedicated to this region. These studies approached the subject from the vantage point of kinship and clan structure (Vainshtein 1981), ethnic stereotypes (Ballkina 1994), the position of males and females in the family and society, as well as the reconstruction of 'Tuvaness' in the wake of post-Soviet disintegration (Mongush 2006; Pimienova 2009). During my own research, I was regularly sent back to these materials and dismissed by my most knowledgeable informants with a comment that the subject had been exhausted. It was by a sheer coincidence that I finally grasped what constituted the difference between being a human, a spirit or an animal in Tuva.

One day, I was observing Hovalygmaa conduct her divination practices in order to detect curses inflicted on one of the secretaries from the University of Kyzyl.

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<sup>20</sup> Tuvan perception of the dead dovetails with the way in which relationships between the living and their dead relatives are conceptualised in Amazonian cosmologies where there is no metaphysical or social link between live humans and dead ones (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 482-3, Fausto 2007: 510) and the deceased is meant to be actively forgotten (Conklin 1995). In a similar way, in Tuva dead relatives become 'others', i.e. animals, spirits or different humans. There is no notion of ancestor worship. The deceased's name is not to be mentioned again, whilst their possessions are either destroyed or given to selected family members and friends. This contrasts with Southeast Asian cosmologies, where the dead and the living preserve metaphysical and social relationships of continuity (Arhem 2016b: 290).



It was a hot day, the windows to the shaman's 'office' were wide open and the client was getting impatient, nervously clenching her fingers and looking at the shaman. Hovalygmaa, despite her overwhelming fatigue, sat in her chair and kept on smoking. Suddenly, she opened her mouth and said, 'your *sülde* is very low, you can be cursed. I can see your *siinezin* will leave soon'. The client's face did not change its expression, despite the ominous words of the shaman. She paid Hovalygmaa two hundred roubles (approximately two pounds) and they agreed on the cleansing ritual. When the woman left I asked the shaman what she meant by *sülde* being very low. 'It is simple', she explained calmly, 'In Tuva people have many layers, they look like rings in the trunk of an old tree'.

### 1.1. Ontological dimensions of being human

In animistic ontologies, humanity constitutes a condition where different species share a kind of universalised subjectivity (Brightman, Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012: 3) and can appear as intentional subjects (Arhem 2016a: 13). As discussed in Chapter Two, in Tuva humans and non-humans are able to interact and communicate with each other within an 'intersubjective field of relations' (Arhem 2016a: 5). Moreover, diverse beings, including humans, spirits, animals and insects<sup>21</sup>, have *siinezin* ('soul') that is 'eternal' (*mönge*) and travels through multiple lives, each time acquiring different physicality. Within this system, similarly to other animistic cosmologies (see, among others, Viveiros de Castro 1998; Pedersen 2001; Taylor 1996; Willerslev 2007), body and soul are not grasped in terms of essence and appearance, where the latter becomes a vessel for the former. Instead, a prototype of a person is defined by 'a variable outer physical covering and a constant inner being' (Arhem 2016a: 14).

This fluid interweavement between 'body' and 'soul' or 'interiority' and 'physicality' (Descola 2013) has particular implications for the ways in which personhood is defined in Tuva and how humans are differentiated from other species.

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<sup>21</sup> During my fieldwork, I did not come across any data implying that *siinezin* pertains also to objects or plants.

In recent discussions, there has been a lot of analysis comparing Siberian, Amerindian and Southeast Asian animism (Arhem 2016b; Sprenger 2016; Brightman & Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012; Humphrey and Pedersen 2007) with numerous studies focusing on the question of personhood (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2012; Safonova and Santha 2012; Swancutt 2012; Sprenger 2016). Within these studies, a lot of work has been dedicated to the notion of perspectivism and its applicability to ontologies outside of Amazonia (Pedersen 2001; Arhem 2016b; Humphrey and Pedersen 2007; Holbraad and Willerslev 2007). For the purpose of my analysis of cursed personhood and in order to introduce the ontological dimensions of being a human in Tuva as opposed to other kinds of persons, I am going to briefly explore the significance of some of the themes discussed in the aforementioned works. I shall focus on the notion of (im)materiality of the soul (Willerslev 2009), the role of karma and fortune (Da Col 2007; Broz 2007) as well as the implications of certain limitations imposed on inter-species transformations (Broz 2007; Arhem 2016a).

As mentioned earlier, in Tuva *sünezin* constitutes an inalienable aspect of most beings. *Sünezin* is originally Mongolic term (cf. Classical Mongolian *sunesun*) with which the Turks of Southern Siberia (including the Tuva-Uriankhay group) replaced the word *kut* ('soul'), used initially among all of the Turkic-speaking peoples (Kara and Kunkovacs 2014: 156). Nevertheless, among Tuvans the concept of soul does not refer to an ontologically discrete, immaterial 'spirit' as opposed to matter as, for instance, in the Christian understanding of the concept. When I asked one of the shamans if she could describe for me what *sünezin* is like, she provided me with this short description:

'*Sünezin* is like a grain. It has traces from your last life. Then you are planted in the ground, you grow, have branches and leaves, you collect juices from this life. Then, when you die, you shrink and the juices go back to the grain and the traces of it are taken on to the next place, next soil'.

Rather than representing an invisible substance, *sünezin* constitutes an entity that can take on different shapes and colours. It can always be recognised by shamans and occasionally be noticed by laymen. It is usually described as a grey cloud or a shadow that moves very quickly, leaving a cold wind behind. Moreover, *sünezin*

remains interconnected with other ‘soul-like concepts’ (Pedersen and Willerslev 2012: 469) or layers that produce a human in Tuva (I shall discuss this later on in this section). One of these layers, *sagysh satpa* (‘emotions, dreams’), can under certain circumstances become a physical image of the deceased. In this way, body and soul work as the flip side of each other (Willerslev 2009: 697), challenging any differentiation between ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’. The interchangeability of body and soul is discussed in some of the ethnographic works on Siberia (Willerslev 2009; Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2012; Ulturgasheva 2016). For instance, Willerslev shows how Chukchi turn themselves inside out, in that ‘inner substance’ and ‘outward form’ cross over, each becoming the other, so that it is impossible to specify which is their body and which their soul (Willerslev 2009: 697). In Tuva, in the instances of a sudden death, *sagysh-satpa* separates itself from *sünezin* and lingers in the realm of humans awaiting *sünezin*’s rebirth. If the ritual dedicated to reincarnation of *sünezin* is not conducted properly, for example, due to the shaman’s lack of experience, *sagysh satpa* becomes the body of the deceased, which is then used by spirits, like an envelope, in order to torment and curse the living relatives.

The materiality of *sünezin* and corporeality of *sagysh-satpa* echo the Amazonian concept of the ‘eye-soul’ (Taylor 1996) embedded in the notion of reversibility, the essential premise of perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998). This key elaboration on ‘humanized nature’ (Arhem 2016a: 7) constitutes one of the crucial analytical parameters which allow to understand the process of producing persons and recognising ‘the Other’ in Amerindian animistic systems. Perspectivism proposes that all living beings are subjects imbued with a point of view and can take on the viewpoints of others (Humphrey and Pedersen 2007: 143). Within this system, possessing a soul implies the ability to adopt a point of view whereas having a body, defined as a bundle of capacities, affects and dispositions, facilitates differences between the viewpoints (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 480). A lot of work has been done on the use of perspectivism and its efficacy in the process of understanding personhood in Siberian contexts (Skvirskaja 2012; Lavrillier 2012; Humphrey 2007; Stepanoff 2009). In Tuva, perspectival exchange interweaves with notions of karma and good fortune whilst bearing certain implications for the process of becoming and being a human.

According to Tuvans, any existence remains contingent on perpetual rebirth. As mentioned in my informant's description, in each new life *sünezin* becomes 'planted' within a different domain, which belongs to humans, spirits or animals, while retaining the traces and elements of its previous lives. As such, *sünezin* constitutes a form of 'immortal consciousness' (Pedersen and Willerslev 2012: 480), which functions beyond the body and retains its identity rather than its identity being perceived as purely relational like in some Amerindian ontologies (Rivière 1999: 80-81). Whether *sünezin* is reborn as a human, spirit, animal or god is strictly dependent on how much pollution (*nugul*) or 'good' (*samaa*) it has accumulated in previous lives. Moreover, spirits may decide to spontaneously reveal themselves to people who are considered to be particularly fortunate or who perform a lot of good deeds. Very often, these processes are also described by Tuvans as contingent on good or bad karma and one's position in the cycle of reincarnation.<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, has certain implications for the ways in which perspectives shift between different species. For example, in the instances of cursing that bring significant imbalance into the field of fortune, the victims may sometimes slowly begin to turn into animals, such as dogs or mice, or acquire the physique of certain spirits, thus partially losing their human personhood. In other contexts, when death is expected to occur, Tuvan shamans may organise specific rituals for their clients during which the client is introduced to a spirit as his or her future son or daughter (see Figure 6). If the client has accumulated enough good fortune, the spirit may agree for the human to be reborn as a part of the spirit's family. In these cases, the client is offered a quick glimpse into their future life and future family.

This echoes, to some extent, 'Tibetan perspectivism' as discussed by Da Col (2007). In his analysis, Da Col shows how the absence of the notions of karma as well as fortune results, among Amerindians, in perspectivism being described mainly as a view from 'somewhere' (2007: 218). Conversely, in Tibetan perspectivism, every perspective refers to a point of view on one's karmic continuum and depends on the state of unstable fortune (2007: 218). In this way, it is events that unfold subjectivities

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<sup>22</sup> This illuminates how some aspects of animism, including the notion of personhood, have developed in Tuva along great world religions, such as Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism (Piemenova 2013: 121; Süzükei 2010: 34).

rather than the shamans travelling through different worlds (ibid.). Moreover, the ability to move between perspectival boundaries is temporally determined (Broz 2007). In a similar fashion, in Tuva the ability to shift perspectives does not seem to be restricted to people who mastered a particular skill, such as shamans, but rather constitutes a ‘temporal capacity’ (Humphrey and Pedersen 2007: 146) contingent on fortune and karma that pertains to everyone. Thus, it can be suggested that, to a certain extent, humans in Tuva can control perspectival exchanges with spirits through proper conduct and accumulation of good deeds and good fortune. This, in turn, provides them with some degree of agency in the process of becoming a particular kind of person and acquiring or maintaining a particular kind of personhood.



**Figure 6:** Ritual during which the client (the man on the left) is introduced to the spirit – his future mother.

Following on from this, there are certain constraints imposed on the potentiality for reversibility between humans and non-humans. For example, being a human and having a human personhood is considered as the highest possible privilege, whereas becoming *Chetker* (responsible for cursing) or an animal, such as a dog, constitutes a form of punishment and might be associated with curses. Interestingly though, more stress seems to be placed upon perspectival exchange with spirits rather than animals

or other humans. Moreover, relations between humans and spirits, especially the masters of places and gods, are strictly hierarchical and often include elements of penalty and reward depending on humans' conduct. This dovetails with animistic systems in Southeast Asia, where hierarchy and interactions with spirits constitute fundamental structuring principles of the cosmos (Arhem 2016a: 12-13), as opposed to venatic animism, typical of Amerindian perspectivism (ibid.), where humans and non-humans can exchange perspectives in an equal, that is, horizontal way.

Lastly, in Tuvan ontology not all spirits and animals have *süñezin*, which complicates further understandings of what unites or separates humans from other species. For example, many animals are understood as distinct creations of gods, such as Kudai or Erlik, rather than ('fallen') humans (Broz 2007: 294). In a similar fashion, many spirits do not present concrete traits like Amazonian spirits, who have clear qualities such as non-human essence or vital principle (Viveiros de Castro 2007: 155). Moreover, there is not much known about the realm where the spirits live and whether it in any way resembles the realm where humans exist, which is also characteristic of other ethnographic contexts in Siberia (Humphrey 2007; Broz 2007). Consequently, when spirits present themselves to shamans or laymen, they can take animal or humanoid forms. However, they can be anthropomorphic, with many human or animal traits, but not necessarily be a reincarnation of ancestors. Instead, they often have unknown origins (Broz 2007: 300). Therefore, as pointed out by Humphrey, spirits do not form an ontologically unified category in Siberian cosmologies and usually have diverse characteristics and names (2007: 183), which pertains to Tuva. Finally, different rivers, mountains or trees as well as objects, rather than being animated by the shared essence are often perceived as artefacts that belong to someone (Broz 2007: 300). In other words, they constitute indexes of their master owners (*eezi*) or other spirits which control them.

Thus, the notion of human personhood in the ethnographic context of Tuva dovetails with understandings of being a human as contingent on the fluid intertwinement between the notions of body and soul characteristic of animistic ontologies. Nevertheless, the contrast between human personhood in Tuva and the notion of perspectivism illuminates certain limitations of this intertwinement,

exemplified through the influences of other religions, in particular Buddhism, the role of fortune and the complex and uncertain characteristics of spirits.

Having discussed some of the ontological features of being a human in Tuva with brief references to the wider contexts of Amerindian and Southeast Asian animism, in the next section I am going to concentrate on the most essential dimension of human personhood among Tuvans: its concentric structure.

## **1.2. ‘The Tuvans are like growth rings in the trunk of a tree’**

According to my informants, every human, as opposed to other kinds of persons, is meant to be constructed from numerous interdependent layers, which can be understood as different souls, gathered around and turned in on a central point; *sünezin*. While *sünezin* is considered static (*shimcheer chok*), different souls can move (*shimcheer*) and, thus, become high (*bedik, uzun*), meaning robust, or low (*kyska, chavys*), that is, weak, depending on a variety of factors, including the presence of illnesses and curses.

Every *sünezin* remains strictly connected with *sülde* (‘emblem’), the following layer. *Sülde* is always meant to be high and strong, and indicates whether a person finds themselves in a condition of overall balance or disturbance. Often, if *sülde* is decreasing, people become particularly clumsy and lose the ability to work with their hands. Subsequently, if *sülde* is low, it indicates that a person is vulnerable and easy to manipulate, can quickly become sick, commit crimes, or turn into an alcoholic. Another layer, *sülde-sünezini* (‘the state of the body’), indicates whether the person is healthy or suffering from a physical illness. The next layer, *kudu-sünezini* (‘consciousness’), reveals illnesses that in biomedicine would be associated with the mind, such as depression. Finally, the *tura-soruu* (‘physical appearance’) layer refers to peoples’ general conduct in everyday life. If it is low, the person stops taking care of themselves, becomes ‘dirty’ (*hirlig*) and wears shredded clothes. Low *tura-soruu* leads to further problems with education, work and communication with other people. When the Tuvans describe what constitutes a human, they also mention *sagysz* or *sagysz satpa* (‘plans, dreams’), a layer that indicates the person’s ideas and goals as

well as unfulfilled plans or promises. Apart from *sagysh/satpa*, Tuvans recognise *setkil* ('mind'), which refers exclusively to thoughts, and *setkil endeves* ('emotions'). All of these layers are held together by breath (*thyn*). Coloured breath usually indicates the person is nearing death. The shamans recognise silver breath (*serch thyn*), which indicates that *sünezin* is about to leave the human being, as well as gold (*ak*) and red (*kyzyl*) breath, which imply imminent death or the presence of curses. People can still breathe without *sünezin*, nonetheless, death is expected. Once breath is cut off, each layer of the person begins to separate. *Sünezin* and *sagysh satpa* linger between the spaces of humans and spirits whilst the rest of the layers vanish and the physical body is disposed of and forgotten. After *sünezin* leaves the body, it takes seven days for it to realise it has been separated. It then embarks on a journey, usually guided by a shaman, to seek a place where it can be reborn. After forty-nine days a ritual is conducted when the gates to the previous life are closed by a shaman, and *sünezin* is reborn as either a spirit, a human being, or an animal, and the person who passed away is not to be mentioned again afterwards.

### 1.3. Concentric humans and *sünezin* as a centre of being

Whilst the numerous layers producing a human remain perpetually fluid and mobile, *sünezin* constitutes a static centre in a given life which maintains the rest of the layers in a relationship of interdependency. In this way, it can be argued that people in Tuva are concentric, in a sense that they are turned in on their centre (Poulantzas 1980: 101) or point of origin (Errington 1983: 547). In order to illustrate this argument further, I refer to Errington's analysis of the body in Luwu (1983) and the notion of *sumange*.

In her discussion, Errington shows how *sumange* constitutes the vital energy, which pertains to everything and renders people conscious, healthy and effective (ibid.: 548). Consequently, the body is shaped in a way that it has a source of power or point of origin, 'around which peripheral matter are oriented' (ibid.: 547). This structure can be also found in the organisation of other sorts of places, such as, houses and kinship groupings (ibid.) Like *sumange*, which when properly attached and concentrated remains a sign and cause of good health (ibid.: 548), *sünezin* constitutes



the centre of a person, rooted and thus immobilised in a domain of humans. In other words, in order for life to happen people have to be centred. The process of growth and life development is then characterised by the fluid movement of the remaining layers, concentrated around static *sünezin* and described through the opposition between high and low, which indicate shifts in emotions, states of mind, health, relations with other people and the presence of curses amongst others. In a similar way to *sumange*, once *sünezin* leaves the body due to nearing death or curses, humans become quickly unconscious or extremely weak. The rest of the layers or soul-like elements dissolve while *sünezin* becomes reborn and thus ‘grounded’ again in a new domain, be it the domain of humans, spirits or animals.

Consequently, the concentric structure of personhood illuminates how people are not construed from clearly differentiated dimensions like the inside and outside, but rather remain, to echo Poulantzas’s argument on the characteristics of space in ancient Greece (1980), ‘turned in on their own centre’ (ibid.: 101) or, as mentioned earlier, point of origin. As a result, they continue to stay perpetually open and thus susceptible to the feelings, wishes and actions of others. In short, there are ‘no enclosures and disclosures, only openings and ways through’ (Ingold 2011: 84). In consequence, social interactions become a key contributor to the individual’s conditions, such as health, fortune etc., rather than discontinuous with it.

Once centred, *sünezin* initiates within a newborn human a condition of relatively constant homeostasis, dominant in the absence of new curses or other misfortune. Consequently, any changes to the layers organised around *sünezin* instantiated for example, through occult practices, indicate transformations within the whole person. The concentric structure of human personhood illuminates, therefore, how soul and body, even though differentiated among Tuvans, are not perceived as independent or isolated from each other. Rather they remain intimately interlinked within a multilayer structure. This, in turn, sheds some light on my informants’ difficulties and confusion, discussed in the introduction to this chapter, to address questions of corporeality and physicality as individual notions.

This interdependence becomes particularly evident in the process of production of sociality in Tuva, which I illustrate with reference to Bird-David’s discussion of

personhood among the Nayaka (2004). In her work, Bird-David shows how, rather than differentiating between body and mind, the Nayaka focus on a person's communicative behaviour. From this angle the body is not separated from the mind and the emotions, but is embedded in the social situation that includes particular bodily moves (2004: 333). In a similar fashion, among Tuvans the notions of care, love and respect are expressed through a variety of physical moves. Rich body language, especially in the presence of children or a newly encountered group of people, constitutes for Tuvans an indication of good will and openness. Within this social context, an interesting ethnographic fact reflects the parents' tendency to show love towards their offspring through sniffing them. In a similar manner, during the rituals bodily actions illuminate both a form of protection from the spirits and an indication of respect and gratitude. The participants are expected to cover their bodies with clothing and jewellery in order to protect themselves from losing *sünezin*, to please the spirits, and express their attentiveness and esteem. Lack of hygiene, long nails and messy hair are associated with the presence of spirits who try to curse or take away something from people, such as good fortune. Further connections between bodily transformations and the interactions with spirits in general are discussed in the second section of this chapter.

Having established the basic, concentric structure of personhood, which pertains only to humans in Tuva, in the following part I show how the characteristics of human personhood emerge from a combination of spirits' and relatives' influences as well as echoes of previous lives. This, consequently, seems to suggest that, beyond thinking of them as sociocentric, we need to grasp people and Tuvan personhood as cosmocentric – a difference I shall be explaining in what follows.

#### **1.4. Residues of the past and juices of the present**

In animistic cosmologies, the process of construction of personhood often intertwines with different bodily arrangements as well as forms of social exchange and contact (see, amongst others, Conklin and Morgan 1996; Bird-David 2004; Strathern 1988). Bodies and persons are distinct products of a social and cultural milieu (Conklin

and Morgan 1996) with personhood perceived as an ongoing project contingent on and representing the matrix of social relationships (Bird-David 2004; McCallum 1996). In short, rather than about an individual, personhood reveals something about the societal patterns of interactions and existence within a group. In this sociocentric structure, interactions with spirits are imbricated in the wider realm of the social in the sense that, to echo Durkheim, they become a broader expression and reinforcement of the society (Pals 2006: 105).

As discussed earlier in the context of animistic ontologies and the notion of perspectivism, in Tuva the condition of being a human constitutes a complex process that is spatially and temporally predicated upon a cosmic chain of events and reflects a gradual, lengthy procedure of transformability contingent not on one, but multiple lives. Human personhood is moulded over the course of many existences and remains intertwined with the wider web of relations with spirits and kin that fluctuate between the residues of the past and, to echo my friend's remark, the 'juices' of the present. In this way, the ethnographic context of Tuva makes one think about personhood in a cosmocentric rather than sociocentric fashion. In short, rather than being an inscription of the social which bounds up humans, gods and spirits in a relation of representation and hierarchy in a specific relation to 'society', the process of producing personhood in Tuva elucidates cosmic dynamics of complementarity, with the society being an integral part of the wider cosmos. In this system, to draw on Ingold's argument about animacy, interactions with spirits go beyond the process of projecting the social onto the surrounding things (2006: 10). Rather, they constitute 'the dynamic transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence' (ibid.). In order to demonstrate the cosmocentric characteristics of personhood in Tuva and, thus, illustrate my argument in a more thorough manner, I first refer to the ideas of shadow and echo, discussed in the works of Desjarlais (2000) and Ulturgasheva (2016).

In his work on death among Yolmo Wa, Desjarlais discusses the phenomenon of *bhaja*, which illuminates a particular relation between the person and their shadow also grasped as echo (2000: 264). Desjarlais shows how echo can not only sound, but also can be seen and how it indicates an absence of something that was present and therefore contains traces of its predecessor (ibid.: 265-266). There are particular

similarities between the concept of *bhaja* as echo and the way the production of a person is described among Tuvans. In Tuva, once a person is born, they carry with them residues or echoes of their past lives, such as traces of the good (*saama*) or pollution (*nugul*). Interestingly, however, it is mainly the latter that can materialise and is usually associated with curses. This relates primarily to clan curses, such as *doora nugul* and *doora dostug* (described in Chapter One), which can be carried on for seven generations and are considered as form of the past lives' residues. Nonetheless, it is common to carry the residues of other curses experienced in previous lives too.

Like in the case of *bhaja*, these 'traces' (*chyrtyk*) of past lives are mainly visual – that is, they materialise themselves in a form of prolonged illness, bodily deformations or pre-mature deaths, rendering bodies an integral element of the wider image of cursed personhood. On a few occasions, I met with families in which one of the kids suffered from autism or Down's syndrome. The parents of the child would explain that their offspring's condition was a tangible evidence of the presence of curses from previous lives. These diverse visual deformations were, in other words, a form of a reminder of the deeds performed by the *sünezin* of the child in previous lives. In short, the visual residues of curses exemplified in bodily transformations constituted a mimesis of the previous life, although in the sense that repetition was not about repeating but 'turning into something else (...) that re-presents and overcomes its origins' (Melberg 1995: 37). Interestingly, the visual traces of engagements with curses in previous lives dovetail with the Yolmo Wa's understanding of good death and bad death, where a good death (or in the case of Tuvans rather a good life), does not leave a dangerously strong 'echo' behind (Desjarlais 2000: 267).

The partible construction and transformation of personhood, dependant on residues of the past or future, reverberates further in the work of Ulturgasheva (2016) on the Eveny and the notion of *djuluchen*. Ulturgasheva shows how *djuluchen*, the form of a shadow, imitates the body of the person. It can be separated from the human and sent into the future as a way of foreshadowing it along the desired life trajectory (2016: 56). As in the cases of *djuluchen*, the idea of a shadow as part of the person prevails in Tuvan imagery. For instance, *sünezin* is described by people and shamans as a grey cloud that shows up after the person dies and disappears instantly. More than that, shadows of the deceased might visit the living relatives in dreams before the final

ritual of forty-nine days when *sünezin* is reborn. Occasionally, children can see shadows of ancestors lingering in the streets or wandering around the flats, usually resembling black clouds in the shape of a human. Moreover, although Tuvans do not split their personhood like the Eveny, each life involves conscious projects of securing prosperity and health in the future lives of *sünezin*. In short, people make sure they do not accumulate too much *nugul* and preserve enough *saama* and, in this way, similarly to the notion of *djuluchen*, the process of constructing personhood becomes contingent on, to an extent, the shadows of the future.

Apart from the residues of past lives, personhood in Tuva emerges from ‘the juices’, to again use shaman’s analogy, of the present. These include, firstly, the characteristics of the spirits that inhabit the region where *sünezin* is reborn. For instance, spirits from the Cut Hol region in the West of Tuva are meant to be wise, patient and brave, qualities that they share with people born in their vicinity. Consequently, the inhabitants of the Ylug Hemhijskij region are great speakers and always say what they think and feel. Conversely, people from Erzin in the South of Tuva are modest, usually uttering just a few words, but are very hospitable. This form of behaviour is also expected by the shaman from the spirits who partake in the rituals in this region. In this way, people come into existence with and through spirits, illuminating, to echo Espirito Santo, how life is more of a generation, than just an emanation of being (2012: 269).

The course of every human being’s life is further predestined by the residues of the lives of both their parents and grandparents. Interestingly, each *sünezin* decides which family they want to be reborn in. Given this, Tuvans are not meant to blame their relatives for any misfortunes, such as curses, inherited from their kin. Finally, one of the essential elements of the concentric structure of human personhood among Tuvans involves the concept of ‘fate’ (*uule, chol, salym chol*). *Uule* refers to the individual eternal course of being of each *sünezin* that can be improved or worsen depending on how each life is lived. Apart from *uule*, each human being has *chol*, which is generated by *uule*. For example, one’s *chol* in a given life is to be an only child. Every human being has simultaneously *salym chol*, which constitutes a course of events prescribed for one particular life. Finally, every Tuvan has *salym-chajan*, which alludes to talents or skills imbued in every human being at birth. Very often

Tuvans say: ‘in this life his *salym chajan* is to be a musician’ (*sen aki muzykant salym chajan sen*).

Thus, the construction of human personhood in Tuva emerges from a distinct matrix of social and cosmic elements and undergoes transformations that exceed one individual life span. In other words, rather than being gradually modelled through different forms of sociality or bodily actions, *süinezin* is reborn with a particular (‘already given’) repertoire of elements and residues, a form of ‘bestowed upon’ personhood that can be further strengthened or weakened. Rather than taking shape only through engagement with the social world, Tuvan human personhood precedes it and involves a set of relations with spirits and the cosmos as a whole. Nevertheless, people grow and they enhance their *saama* or *nugul* through daily interactions, which is then carried onto the next life. Within this process, curses, while introducing overall vulnerability to the feelings, wishes and actions of others, make people susceptible to social and cosmic relationships as key contributors to individual well-being and prosperity or suffering endured in this and next lives. In other words, while weaving the relations between humans and spirits together, the phenomenon of cursing is also intimately associated with the ways people grow in a given life as human beings.

In the following section, I extend my discussion on how cursing influences the production of human personhood and show how new curses bring cognitive, physical and emotional processes together in an explicit fashion whilst instigating a state of turbulence. In so doing, I place particular emphasis on how curses (de)form bodies, transforming them into neither an object nor a text, nor a centre of subjectivity, but ‘a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of’ (Latour 2004: 206) and thus a materialised arena of sociocosmic dynamics.

## **2. Cursed personhood**

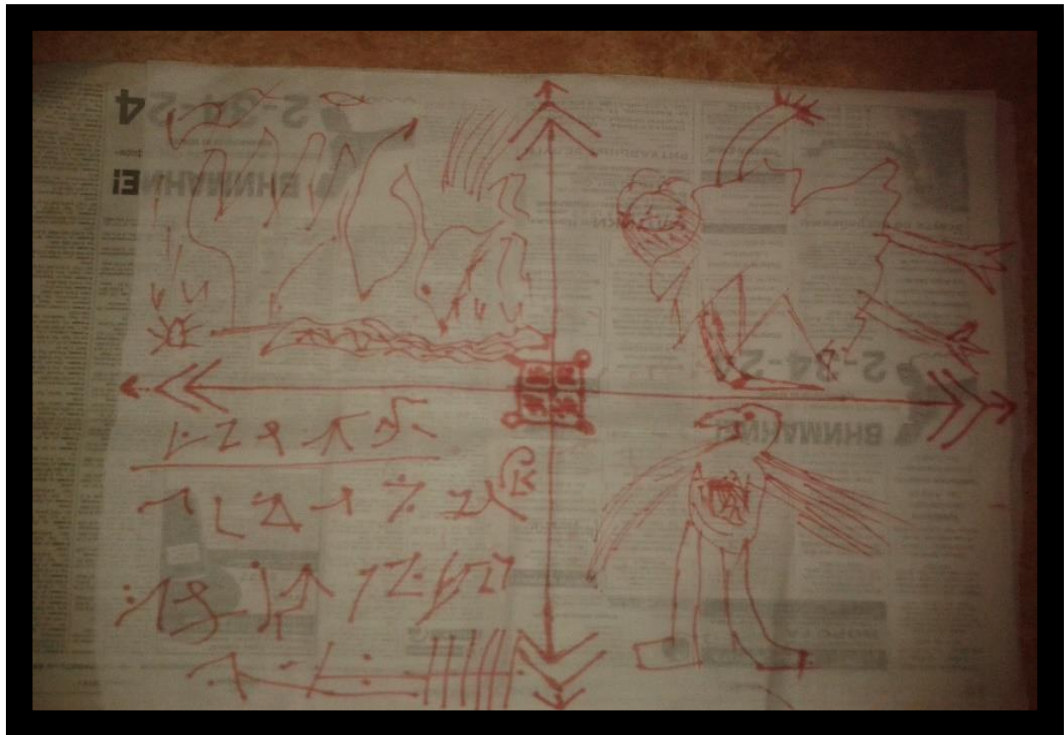
When discussing the issues of luck and good fortune, my informants would often portray happiness as relatively continuous socioeconomic cohesion or balance, such as having a lot of animals, many children, and good health. In short, life in Tuva,

rather than being seen as a compilation of different states, has been described to me more as a condition or trajectory that, in the ideal and rare circumstances, remains relatively constant. In a similar way, a healthy person is said to be someone who remains in a condition of continual overall ‘homeostasis’ (Cannon 1932: 24) or balance. Within this structure, all the layers which produce a human continue to be intertwined with *sünezin* in a roughly regular manner without being dislocated through any disturbances, such as, cursing. In short, curses constitute a sort of ‘injurious agent’ (ibid.: 202), which, with sudden immediacy and speed, introduces disturbance into the fragile condition of balanced personhood. As the shamans explain it, once cursed the victims begin to behave in unpredictable ways, comparable to erratic waves of wind. All the layers that produce a person start to tremble, transforming people into turbulent beings. The implications of curses as turbulence are diverse. Once spirits attack their victim, they begin to interfere with the client’s health, emotions, thoughts and relations with people. The victims abruptly change their behaviour, as well as the way they feel. They become unpredictable in their decisions and reactions, doing and saying things uncommon for them and outside of their usual behaviour. The victims are often unaware of their actions whilst feeling paranoid. Sometimes people feel depressed or particularly sad and weak. Other symptoms involve sudden illnesses (occasionally, at the exact same time each year) such as coma or strokes, which pass equally abruptly after a few days. Sudden alcoholism, clumsiness, violence, and aggression, as well as vivid dreams in which spirits might try to kill the victim, are very common. Many of these changes are instantiated in the way the body of the cursed person is seen as changing.

## **2.1. Images of curses**

One day, Hovalygmaa and I visited her dear friend, Katija, a policewoman, who, after coming back from a holiday, began to feel depressed and lethargic and seemed particularly unhappy at work, with people constantly gossiping about her. She lost energy and suspected severe illness. As it turned out, she was cursed by one of her colleagues, an otherwise very friendly next-door neighbour desperate for promotion.

As the shaman described it, the woman looked as if she was deprived of bones. Everything was moved around and her organs were falling apart. The spirit inflicting the curse turned out to be a huge bird with a long, curved beak. It was slowly breaking the woman's bones, smashing her organs and making her feel paranoid and anxious. Whilst providing both myself and the client with this vivid description, the shaman sat on the floor, took out a square white piece of material and vigorously began to draw with a red marker what she was seeing. Afterwards, she encouraged me to take a photograph of her drawing, implying it would be useful for my and others' educational purposes (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** The shaman's drawing.

The top-right image presents what the victim looked like to the shaman and what the curse had done to her. The second image on the bottom-right presents an angry bird; the shape of the spirit inflicting the curse. The upper-left square shows a mouse, which was supposed to carry the counter-curse to the client's rival. The final square shows a name of the neighbour who requested curse infliction, written in signs that were dictated to the shaman by the helping spirit. After the shaman finished her drawing, the material was burned and the ashes of it were thrown out the window.



As already discussed, the shamans in Tuva are well-known for their ability to see things which cannot be otherwise noticed (Chapter Two). Every time the shaman meets with a client, they are instantly exposed to concrete images, such as animals, birds or insects, as well as different forms of bodily deformations that signal the presence of curses. Spirits responsible for curse infliction enter the body of the victim through the head (*bes**h*) and nest in the stomach (*hyr**yn*), intestines (*shoj**yhny*), or chest (*hörek*), bringing with them curses in the form of disturbing energy. Sometimes, the spirits sit on the shoulder (*egin*) or randomly chose a part of the body to which they attach (*hyr**balanyr*) themselves. They often turn into serpents, mice, birds or dogs, and like to entangle or weave around the client's organs. They can either remain still in their chosen place or they can bite flesh (Rus. *telo*), break bones (*söök*), or, in severe cases, attempt to initiate the transformation of a client into, for instance, a dog. Children and foreigners are particularly at risk from the attacks of spirits, as they are seen by spirits as 'thin' (*dygysh chok*) people. In case of the former, the adjective 'thin' refers to 'pure' (*aryg*) creatures with thin hair and skin. In the case of the latter, it describes being unaccustomed to interactions with spirits and thus especially susceptible to their powers and tricks. In order to protect newly-arrived guests and children, the shamans always make sure their heads are covered with a hat in the presence of spirits and during the rituals. The head constitutes the thinnest part of the body and, as such, allows *sünezin* and spirits to freely move through it. On some occasions, rather than entering the body, the spirits begin to live with the victims in their flats, observing them while casting nasty looks and following them in their everyday routines. These spirits often appropriate the physique of deceased relatives, although it is common for them to also transform into a beautiful woman with her breasts at the back, or a man with an iron nose (Lindquist 2008).

A very typical symptom of curse constitutes mud (*hir*) that accumulates in different parts of the body, although the shamans often point to head, stomach and shoulders while revealing their visions. *Hir* constitutes a residue and a consequence of curses present for lengthy periods of time. Interestingly, the process of accumulation of *hir* as a result of curses is indexical of other ways of polluting in Tuvans' everyday lives. For instance, a type of heating used in flats mainly during the winter, as well as nearby coal-powered factories, generates dark clouds of soot that can be seen for miles.

This soot accumulates everywhere – inside the flats, on furniture, on clothes – and constitutes an integral, irritating element of life in the city in winter. People find it on their hands, faces and noses, and always complain about it, repeating *saasha, saasha* ('soot, soot'). As a result, in the summer it is very common for people to dispose of destroyed furniture, paint their flats and clean their houses. Also, it is common to invite the shamans to conduct cleansing rituals and remove dirt that has accumulated in people, including curses. Once a cursed client visits the shaman, they can see how much mud has been accumulated and to what extent curses have disturbed the person. Apart from that, the shamans can easily recognise curses simply by studying the client (Chapter Two).

The material symptoms of curses are diverse; however, the most common are different smells, changes in skin color (skin may become yellow), and bags under the eyes. Some people may have red, silver or gold breath (especially when they are near death). The organs might be disturbed or moved, and sometimes they may turn black. On other occasions, especially with strong death curses, bodies may dry out. Once the shamans engage in divination practices or commence the curse deflection rituals, they provide the clients with vivid images of curses and the spirits inflicting them. Interestingly, there is a particular overlap between the preservation of bodily homeostasis in biology and the actions that shamans prescribe for their clients in order to protect them from curses. As stated by Cannon (1932), the crucial element of preservation of a homeostatic condition is maintenance of 'the controlled fluid matrix' (ibid.: 295). Similarly, after each ritual the shaman imposes on the victim particular restrictions that involve fluid control and exchange. The most common restriction, usually lasting seven days, is a limitation on the consumption of alcohol, sexual abstinence and forbidding the consumption of certain types of food, the choice of which depends on the shaman and the expectations of the spirits. Consequently, in the presence of a death curse, the shamans provide the victim with a glass of water in order to alleviate bodily dryness. Finally, at the end of each ritual, which involves the deflection of curses, everyone present is asked to drink tea with milk in order to maintain health and ensure the surge of good luck.

Even though Tuvans do not recognise the body as an isolated entity, the accurate recognition of cursed personhood is contingent on the concrete images of

bodily (de)formations that the shamans perceive and present to the clients. Nevertheless, these bodies are not grasped as discrete material substance. Rather, as in other animist ontologies (among others see Viveiros de Castro 1998; Conklin 2001), they are perceived as ‘a dialectic arena where the natural elements are domesticated by the group and the elements of the group (social elements) are naturalized in the world of animals’ (Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro, 1979, cited in Brightman, Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012: 4). In this way, cursed bodies can be approached as sites where relations to others are created, transformed, and terminated (Conklin 2001) whilst being perpetually affected by a variety of processes that occur near or within them (McCallum 1996; Bird David 2004) and thus deprived of ‘the strict inner/outer distinction’ inherited from Cartesian philosophy (Smith 2012: 60).

In other words, the ethnographic context of Tuva illuminates how to have a particular kind of body (in this case a cursed body) ‘*is to learn to be affected, moved, put into motion by other entities*’ (Latour 2004: 205, original emphasis). In short, curses, while introducing turbulence to a victim, transform bodies into active trajectories that produce both a concrete kind of a turbulent person and a particular kind of a turbulent cosmos. As presented earlier, curses make people and their personhoods vulnerable to the wishes and actions of others, including spirits and humans, a process that materialises itself in concrete bodily images, visible to a certain extent to other people (in a form of bodily deformations, smell etc.) and fully accessible to shamans (in images of mud and changed organs). In this way, from the perspective of the mechanics of cursing, acquiring a (cursed) body constitutes a progressive enterprise (ibid.: 207) through which one learns to register and becomes susceptible to ‘what the world is made of’ (ibid.: 206). Rather than focusing on direct definitions of the body, approaching bodies from the angle of curses allows us to concentrate on ‘what the body has become aware of’ (ibid.). Given this, cursed bodies do not constitute a provisional residence of something superior – an immortal soul (ibid.) – but instead are the field of action (Espirito Santo 2012: 258). Rather than an isolated entity, they come into being through the ongoing encounter with the world (ibid.). While constituting a catalyst for curses to acquire materiality, bodies remain critical to the affirmation of the overall presence of the cursed person(hood).

Presented in this chapter ethnographic examples of cursed personhood and the role of spirits raise some analytical problems that look similar to the notions of spirit possession and, perhaps, exorcism. Nonetheless, the use of these interpretations poses certain challenges in the ethnographic context of Tuva, as Tuvans never perceive such events in terms of spirit possession and most definitely not exorcism. Instead, they often find these suggestions offensive (similarly to any mention of trance and spirit possession in relation to shamans and their work, as discussed in Chapter Two). In short, the spirits' involvement in cursing, rather than being grasp through a rhetoric of possession, reflects instances of spirits living with and around their victims, rather than in them, whilst producing a particular kind of sociability predicated on the intrinsic notion of turbulence. Inevitably, this idea requires more investigation which could be the subject of further research.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the concept of human personhood in Tuva and its intertwinement with the phenomenon of cursing. In my analysis, I have shown how in the ethnographic context of Tuva, the concepts of body and soul are not independent and separated, in the way in which they are differentiated. Instead, they come together in an explicit fashion while producing and reflecting a concentric structure of personhood contingent on interdependent layers embedded in a matrix of sociocosmic influences. Engaging with the characteristics of humans as opposed to other kinds of persons, I have illuminated how the process of production of human personhood is contingent on the residues of past lives, the lives of relatives and ancestors as well as elements of spirits' characteristics. Along these lines, it is also embedded in the mechanics of cursing, which concern both the past and present lives. In this way, the ethnographic context of Tuva encourages us to approach the notion of personhood as a wider cosmic project, a distinct cosmocentric structure that involves a set of relations with spirits and the cosmos as a whole.

Illuminating the connections between the production of human personhood and curses, I have shown how cursing introduces disturbance to the victims while moving them from a condition of relatively continual balance to turbulence, a process that

becomes materialised through diverse bodily (de)formations. As a result, it is the bodies that constitute a locus upon which curses leave their material residues in the form of concrete images that can be seen by shamans and, sometimes, noticed by laymen. These include the expressions of both social and cosmic pressures experienced in the past lives and materialised in physically tangible forms, such as autism, deformed limbs, and other physical disabilities, as well as the concrete images of new curse attacks characterised, for instance, by the accumulation of mud and changes in skin colour, inner organs, and smell. Consequently, I have illuminated how the body, rather than a given and static isolated entity, constitutes a field of action allowing for the acquisition and production of particular kinds of (cursed) personhood and particular kinds of turbulent sociocosmic dynamics.

In the following chapter, while concentrating on the role of the shamanic drum, I am going to show how curses, shamans and different kinds of persons, including humans and spirits, come together in the ritual setting and produce a particular kind of turbulent space. In so doing, I shall illuminate how, in a similar manner to *sünezin* in the context of personhood, the drum constitutes a centre of the ritual involving curses and thus becomes an indispensable instrument in the process of commencing ritual events. Along these lines, I am going to show how the notion of turbulence represents one of the core ideas in Tuvan cosmology, which pertains not only to personhood and curses but also can be traced in language, mobility patterns, sounds and organisational structure of shamanic rituals.



## Chapter four

### Politics of unsettlement: the role of shamanic drums in the machinery of cursing

#### Introduction

It was a day in late spring. We were on our way to meet a client who lived in the outskirts of the city. The shaman sat comfortably in the taxi and talked excitedly about her adventures in a recent trip to the taiga. After an hour's drive, we arrived at a dilapidated residential block, a grey architectural reminder of the Soviet period in the middle of the steppe. Through a hole in the wall, which served as a gate, we stepped into the dark interior of the building. On the second floor we met Orzju, a German language teacher, who warmly invited us into her kitchen. She was cursed by a neighbor who had seduced Orzju's husband, a common cause of cursing among women in Kyzyl. After the usual exchange of news and gossip and a short meal, the shaman commenced the ritual. Once she disappeared in the corridor we suddenly heard a long, loud cry – a wolf's howl. The room was filled with dancing tendrils of blessed juniper smoke, and the first sounds of the drum with the shaman's soft humming followed. *Pam pam pam*, the sounds of the drum rhythmically emerged through the smoke screen. Drumming faster and faster, the shaman began to move around the room, her coat crackling and her voice getting stronger. '*Pam pam pam...this is the sound of my drum*', the shaman sang in a deep powerful voice. 'I make tornadoes from dirt and dust. Make them swirl, make them for my children *pam pam pam*', her voice rising steadily. 'Cut off the curse, my gods. Make the curse melt away, take away the curse my gods', the voice reaching its highest registry. *Pam pam pam*. 'My drum makes swirls; my drum is thunder'.

Introducing and contextualising the phenomenon of cursing, I have shown in the previous chapters how curses and shamanic practices are bound up with constructions of a particular kind of person. More specifically, I have illuminated how

the interactions among humans as well as humans and non-humans, exemplified in curses are characterised by dynamics of turbulence and balance influencing the concentric structure through which human personhood is articulated. In this chapter, I focus on how shamans, spirits and clients are brought together in the context of cursing rituals through the shamanic drum and its use. In short, I seek to show how, within the space of the ritual, they are brought together and organised around the drum in a centripetal fashion, thus illuminating conceptual similarities between drums and *sünezin* – the centre of human personhood. Consequently, I discuss how the drum is key for the commencement of the ritual event. Through unsettling cosmic fragile configurations, it opens up and produces a distinct turbulent space indispensable to conducting further negotiations with spirits and establishing new arrangements in a form of curse deflection or infliction. Along these lines, I explore how the notion of turbulence constitutes one of the fundamental ideas among Tuvans, which goes beyond the context of curses and can be also traced in the structuring of the ritualistic event, mobility patterns, language as well as sound and music.

Contextualising the central role of the drum in the shamanic ritual, I explore the significance of sound as a key element of Tuvan shamanic practice as well as an integral part of everyday life. More than that, I show how the notions of turbulence and centripetalism are structural properties of sound. Following on from that, I suggest that the process of sound production in Tuvan musical tradition is homologous to the structure of events occurring during shamanic rituals involving curses. In my analysis, I concentrate exclusively on a musical tradition of throat singing known worldwide as *khöömei*, as it is in this tradition that the specific features of the Tuvan sound ideal can be delineated in their most refined form. In short, I propose to employ an understanding of the sound unit in *khöömei* as a discrete analytical framework to explore the turbulent characteristics of the ritual event as it is framed and focused in shamanic performance. In this way, sound brings together most of the themes I have discussed so far, including the significance of curses and the construction of cursed personhood, the efficacy of shamanic practice, the importance of drums, as well as centripetalism and turbulence.

In order to present my argument, the chapter is split into three main sections. I begin my analysis by foregrounding the central role of the drum in the ritual



proceedings. Next, I engage with the significance of turbulence and illuminate how it prevails in diverse aspects of life in Tuva beyond the instances of cursing. In the second section, contrasting Tuvan and classical approaches to sound and musical composition, I briefly introduce the tradition of throat singing and emphasise the turbulent and centripetal features of the sound production that characterises it. In the final section, focusing on curse ritual, I contrast the structure of events in liturgical order and shamanic ritual. Consequently, in this chapter, I delineate how an understanding of the structure of the sound unit upon which *khöömei* is built can help us to explore the way in which ritual space and events occurring within it are produced and organised.

## 1. From drums to turbulence

Drums constitute an essential element of the shamanic instrumental repertoire in Tuva. Before each ritual, the drum is placed in a designated spot by the shaman, where it is meant to dry in order to produce powerful and loud sounds. The shaman always chooses the person who is asked to take the drum and it is considered a form of privilege and recognition.

During Soviet times, the use of the drums was forbidden and, consequently, communication with spirits was significantly disrupted. In Tuva, it is precisely through the use of drums that the shamans are distinguished from other practitioners. As my interlocutors explained, drums used to be made out of different skins due to the different purposes they served. For instance, bull skin was utilised in the time of Mongolian and Chinese invasions, when stealing was common. Skin from a bull was supposed to be the most efficient for detecting and casting *kargysh-chatka* when dealing with cases of theft. Drums made out of horse skin were meant to work faster. Drums made out of wolf skin were designed to kill the shaman. Officially, the shamans refuse today to inflict death curses and kill their rivals. They only admit to cutting off someone's powers or taking their energy away. Given this, drums used by the shamans nowadays are made from goat or deer skin and have less strength to kill, only to harm.

At the beginning of each ritual, the shaman addresses the spirits by saying that the sound of their drum creates whirls and thunders (*duvulendir dingmirej beer dungurumnu, ezinneldir edip turar dungurumnu*). Both of the terms, *ezinneldir*

(‘swirl’) and *duvulendir* (‘whirl’), are also used in relation to the turbulence that accompanies a cursing experience. Thus, the idea of turbulence, associated with the phenomenon of curse, equally prevails within the context of shamanic practice and shamanic rituals. Once the shaman begins drumming, the sound of the drum is understood as a particular power (*kysh*) that creates whirls as well as thunder or tornadoes. In this way, the drum opens a particular event and unsettles cosmic configurations, creating a distinctly turbulent space. This cosmic unsettlement is indispensable for the shaman to undertake negotiations with spirits and (re)arrange things afresh through inflicting or deflecting curses.<sup>23</sup> Throughout most of the ritual, the shaman sits still while continuously drumming which illuminates how, in a similar fashion to *sünezin*, the drum constitutes centre that is rooted in a given event (see Figure 8). Consequently, the drum is perceived as the beginning and the central element of the ritual proceedings, around which all the other elements are arranged and kept in a relation of interdependency. In other words, the drum does to the space of the ritual and the elements it entails what a strong shake does to a snow globe. The subsequent events occurring within this space, along with the overall efficacy of the shamanic performance, remain contingent on the inconsistency and unpredictability of occurring events (I shall return to this point in the final section of the chapter). Before engaging further with this analysis and illustrating my arguments, in the next section I introduce the broader characteristics of the notion of turbulence in order to show how the production of turbulence during the ritual proceedings orchestrated by the drum constitutes a reflection of wider patterns of being that can be traced in diverse aspects of life in Tuva.

### 1.1. *Ezinneldir* and *duvulendir*

The term ‘turbulence’ (Rus. *turbulentnost*), borrowed from physics, was first employed in the context of Siberian music in the 20th century to delineate the acoustical effects produced by a jaw harp (Süzükei 2010: 69). Nevertheless, this effect, grasped in the Tuvan language as ‘swirls’ (*ezinneldir*) and ‘whirls’ (*duvulendir*), exceeds the realm of musical instruments and pertains to a variety of aspects of

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<sup>23</sup> I discuss this process thoroughly in Chapter Five.

everyday life in Tuva. It expresses the meanings of intensification, dispersion and variance. It is also associated with timbre.



**Figure 8:** Hovalymaa with her drum during the outdoor ritual.

Firstly, as discussed in Chapter Three, turbulence refers to cursing experiences. Nevertheless, it can be used to describe sudden changes in behaviour as well as unpredictable or disturbing events and forces not necessarily triggered by the instances of curse. For instance, the spirits and their moods can be described as turbulent. If the spirits arrive at the ritual like *ezinneldir* or *duvulendir*, this means they are very angry and the shaman is doomed to work hard. Subsequently, both of the terms are employed to describe someone's movement that is fast and abrupt and leaves some sort of trace, for instance a cold current. Within the context of intensity, turbulence is used in relation to the strength and unpredictability of fire, which suddenly intensifies due to shifts in the spirits' moods or needs. It can also be employed in order to describe the distinct characteristics and strength of echo and, finally, as presented at the beginning of this chapter, in relation to the drums and what they do. In other contexts, as suggested by my informants, turbulence-like effects can be found in mobility patterns and sounds.

## 1.2. Mobility patterns

One of the most variegated forms of action among Tuvans, which includes unconstrained movement of elements similar to that of turbulence, is travelling habits. In his work on mobility, Ingold discusses the concept of movement as an active and continual engagement with the world along paths that open up (2011: 150). In this way, people ‘thread their way through this world rather than routing across it from point to point’ (ibid.: 151) without having a final destination. In a similar fashion, when describing their trips through the taiga or the steppe, my interlocutors would rarely discuss travelling strictly in terms of reaching point B from point A. Rather, they would talk about things happening on the way and the road itself as if simply moving around. As one of my informants put it, movement can be compared to echo or shining reflections on water. It is about being in one place and swiftly shifting to another without seeking any final destination. Indeed, to a lesser extent, although in an equally noticeable way, while walking in the streets of Kyzyl, my informants often gave me the impression they were not concerned about the place they were meant to be going. During some interviews or trips to visit shamans, we often ended up meandering through the streets, which never seemed to cause any distress or concern to them.

This kind of dispersion and variance prevail further in the way people behave during outdoor rituals. It could be assumed that the shaman constitutes a physical point around which the clients and their relatives would gather. Paradoxically, people seem to organise themselves as if in unrelated points, often seemingly chaotically dispersed. During the rituals I participated in, there were always people standing somewhere on the side, involved in other activities such as reading the newspaper or smoking, waiting for something else to happen. Sometimes, they would suddenly walk away. On other occasions, the shaman would describe certain people as too polluted and close to death or too clean, that is, free from curses, and make them stand on the side or wander in the distance.

These mobility habits do not pertain only to Tuva. Similar tendencies were described by Safonowa and Santha in their ethnography of Evenki (2011). As the authors explain, Evenki wander between situations or events that provoke

companionship (ibid: 74). Their trips are characterised by the lack of a prescribed route. As they say, the breakdowns, river crossings, drunken encounters and other unexpected circumstances liberate them from the hegemony of the initial purpose. This means they can easily take risks, go somewhere without having a concrete purpose and look for occasional contacts and encounters (ibid: 76).

This seemingly random and unpredictable pattern of behaviour is also reflected in jokes and funny anecdotes that people tell about their experiences with foreigners, especially from Europe. For instance, Tuvans are infamous for being late. As a result, foreign guests often experience painful moments and little breakdowns trying to meet a Tuvan at a particular time and organise some sort of activity, a trip or an interview. Their dependency on schedules and punctuality clashes with Tuvan ways of arranging meetings, which are somewhere between sudden appearances and not showing up at all.

### 1.3. Lexicon<sup>24</sup>

In the Tuvan language, there is a rich lexicon of onomatopoetic ideophones, that is, ordinary words depicting sensory imagery which refer to the notion of turbulence. These words illustrate the whole pallet of different sounds that produce turbulence-like acoustic effects, thus generating a distinct image of a turbulent soundscape in Tuva. Below I provide a few examples of these words:<sup>25</sup>

*xoluraash*: Sound of something banging in an empty container of any sort

*xüliüreesh*: Sound of water bubbling down a pipe

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<sup>24</sup> While keeping in mind problematic aspects of relations between language and thought and disputes on universalist and relativist approaches to language (Jakobson 1959; Severi 2014; Sherzer 1987), in this excerpt I show how certain structures in language may only 'lead to certain interpretations generated by the habits of given community' (Whorf 1943: 209-210). In this way, they indicate particular behavioural patterns rather than construct how people think. Thus, particular lexicon and grammatical patterns are not isomorphic of patterns of thinking, but only indicate a particular potentiality that exists within the langue and becomes realised in different discourses (Sherzer 1987: 306).

<sup>25</sup> These examples were kindly shared with me by Walentyňa as a part of her research on ideophones in Tuvan language and timbre-centred listening practices among Tuvans. This research was conducted in collaboration with professor Theodor Levin. I was very lucky to receive a permission from Walentyňa to include fragments of her findings in my own work.

*shylyraash*: Swishing sound, used, for instance, in relation to a young person who is trying to make words, or a drunk who is muttering

*syylaash*: A high-frequency whistling sound often used to describe children's voices

*tyrylaash*: Perpetual vibration or rolling sound, such as hammering, drilling and also certain birds

*dingmireeshkin*: Sound of a thunderous waterfall or thunderstorm

Moreover, there are diverse singing techniques, such as *borbangnadyr*, which comes from a verb *borbangnaar* meaning to jiggle. In this technique, the singer produces gurgling or rustling sounds by pulling his<sup>26</sup> lips and facial muscles in a particular way which represents the sound of turbulent water rolling around rocks in a stream. Moreover, the efficacy of the singer's voice is often assessed based on their ability to produce a lot of echo while singing, which is directly associated with producing turbulence. For instance, people say that someone sang well because 'he sang in a way that made echoes' (*shanggylandyr yrlapkan*).

#### **1.4. Listening in a timbre-oriented way**

The aforementioned lexicon of ideophones depicting the effects of turbulence has particular implications for the distinct ways of listening among Tuvans too. Turbulence is characterised as producing timbre-like effects, linking the two conceptually. In her analysis of timbre – tone colour – Walentyna coined the term 'timbre-centred listening' and explained to me that timbre and, associated with it, turbulence are not merely a reflection of musical taste or aesthetic preferences, but rather represent a psychoacoustic calibration that emphasises a distinct kind of listening.

Given this, Tuvans are able to draw inspiration for their music, and construct knowledge about the surrounding world through listening in a timbral way that is, the

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<sup>26</sup> Throat singers were mainly male due to a taboo that throat singing may cause infertility (Levin and Edgerton 1999: 82). This belief is gradually being dismissed among Tuvans although it is still rare to meet women performing throat singing.

manner in which the listener notices and pays careful attention to different tints or colours of the same sound. Through this particular kind of listening, Tuvans can recognise weather patterns, seasonal changes, hunt and differentiate between animal species and birds with great precisions. Interestingly, timbre as a concept and an integral element of sound, has very rich descriptions in the Tuvan language. As showed to me by Walentyina, it is often characterised as *haash* (nasal), *choon* (thick), *chinge* (thin), *ötkiit* (clear, piercing), *chidig* (sharp), *chymchak* (soft), and *hos* (free, loose, relaxed, empty), as well as sad or wistful (*kudaranchyg*), smooth (*orgu*, *cuuk*, *kylash*) or warm (*chylyg*). Timbre-like qualities are also ascribed to the way in which the shamanic costume is sometimes organised. Different elements of the shaman's gown, such as a metal mirror used to diverge the spirits, the strings (*syr-òk*) symbolising the tips of the shaman's arrows, multiple strings (*kyngyraa*) attached to the shaman's hat and small metal balls (*konguraa*) produce during the ritual a form of timbral dissonance caused by the shaman's movements.

Finally, the notion of turbulence constitutes an intrinsic element of sound production in throat singing known in Tuva as *khöömei*, which has particular implications for understandings of the role of drums in shamanic rituals involving curses. In order to grasp the conceptual and structural correlation between turbulence, sound, drums and shamanic rituals in the context of curses in Tuva, it is essential to delineate the importance of sound in Tuvan ontology in general.

## 2. Sound in Tuva

One of the main attractions in Kyzyl is a park situated on the banks of the Yenisei river. In the main section, there is a monument designating the park as the very center of Asia. The place attracts tourists and families who rest, play and admire the view of the wide steppe and distant Sajan mountains. At the entrance to the park a massive board informs visitors both in the Russian and Tuvan languages about ten things that are strictly forbidden on the premises of the park. Visits to this green square became my usual practice. One of the entertainments was music coming out of the numerous speakers situated around the benches. Shostakovich's and Czajkowski's

operas were combined with Tuvan traditional throat singing. Deep, vibrating voices of Tuvan singers intertwined with smooth passages from the Russian composers and accompanied visitors throughout their walks and conversations, creating this unusual *mélange* of acoustic experience. One day, I shared my musical observations with a friend, an ethnomusicologist and a local expert on the practice of throat singing. Walentyna and I met regularly to study the Tuvan language and talk about life in Kyzyl. She has been a devoted language teacher to all aspiring researchers and ethnographers who have visited Kyzyl since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Walentyna would always wait for me in her office on the second floor of the Tuvan Cultural Centre, next to the room where the Tuvan National Symphony Orchestra rehearsed. Each time, after a round of empathetic smiles while observing my struggle with verb conjugation in the Tuvan language, Walentyna would alleviate my suffering with conversations about music and the theory of sound in throat singing. Inspired by my brief research on throat singing and my sonically dense experiences in the park, I asked Walentyna to teach me how to listen in a Tuvan way. ‘I can’t’, she smiled. ‘You will never be able to hear it properly, in our music it is not about a melody that you can grasp, it is about everything that is around it, all the different smells’, she said as she waived her hands towards her nose as if sniffing something delicious. ‘You need to be able to hear the very nuances of the melody, the almost misty, elusive sounds and for that your ear has to be trained here, in Tuva’, she concluded.

Sounds in Tuva pertain not only to the realm of music, but also emotions, the representation of landscape and animals, topography, and, finally, communication and interactions between humans and spirits. In line with some ethnographic contexts (Basso 1985), singing and performing is neither restricted to people exhibiting particular talents nor considered as a particular vocation. Rather, anyone may have a capacity for expressiveness and creativity and everyone is assumed to possess the skills to play instruments and sing. For instance, as I was told by Walentyna, early on children become familiar with sound making by playing instruments made from natural materials, such as common plants (*murgu*), bullroarers (*hirlee*), birch bark whistles (*ediski*), hunting horns (*amyrga*), wooden jaw harps (*daya-homus*), and many others. These instruments are played simply as a form of entertainment during the long



hours of herding animals. Inspiration to play is meant to come from the deeply-sounded surrounding filled with winds, flowing water, thunders and rain, bird calls, or the cries of wild animals.

In pre-Soviet times, sound played an essential role in hunting, allowing hunters to locate prey and orient themselves in space. For instance, through listening to the sound of a horseshoe, a hunter would recognise a type of ground (stones, sand, moss) (Darzaa 1998: 176). Bird sounds and rodents would inform him about heights and changes in the landscape (ibid.). Some hunters used to have a *hirileesh*, a specific device employed to transform kinetic energy into sound energy. These sounds were easily sensed by animals and were expected to tame and control lightning and wind (ibid.: 177). A very common way of orientating in space was provided by sound calendars, where sounds of winds, water, trees and animals would inform the pasturing groups when it was time to move their *aal* (Süzükei 2010). One of the few remaining reindeer breeders, with whom I worked at the beginning of my fieldwork, vividly described to me how she never got lost in the taiga and never needed a map. What helped her was a form of ‘sonic memory’. Through carefully listening to the forest she was always able to find her way home.

One of the most important aspects of sound and music in Tuva is that it facilitates interactions and communication between humans and non-humans and provides an essential tool for shamans in negotiations with spirits.<sup>27</sup> In this way, shamanic rituals are entrenched in ‘the conceptualization of the cosmos with the vast extensions into invisible realms which rely heavily on sonic production and perception’ (Brabec de Mori 2014: 33). Finally, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Tuvans are famous worldwide for their tradition of throat singing, a particular form of musical performance that has attracted people from all over the world, both as a theoretical and practical phenomenon. I propose that the particular production of sound unit in throat singing, whilst being contingent on the notion of turbulence generated by a central sound, constitutes an effective framework to understand space production and the structure of events in shamanic rituals organised around the drum. Before offering further analysis, I provide a brief contextual outline of the Tuvan music

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<sup>27</sup> I develop this argument further in Chapter Five.

tradition and throat singing practice in order to illuminate the structural characteristics of sound in *khöömei*.

## **2.1. The art of *khöömei***

Defined in Tuva as the art of playing the throat, *khöömei* is known widely as the Tuvan tradition of throat singing (Süzükei 2010: 223). *Khöömei* constitutes one example of timbre-centred music practices in Tuva and is defined by some ethnomusicologists as an auditory and visual perception of the environment (Hodgkinson 2005/2006; Levin 2006). Despite being referred to as singing, *khöömei* constitutes a highly specific and autonomous phenomenon that, although produced by the human vocal apparatus, has very little in common with what is defined as singing. Essentially, the vocal apparatus is considered a separate musical instrument rather than a part of the physical body. This particular approach distinguishes the art of *khöömei* from other timbre-centred sound-making instruments, such as pipes. *Khöömei* constitutes a particular form of performance, which involves only the singer and his voice. Tuvan music experts often stress the fact that, rather than throat singing, *khöömei* should be translated as the art of playing the throat. While performing *khöömei*, a singer produces one main sound (drone) which is then split into its numerous parts (overtones). In order to produce melody, drone and its overtones have to be sung simultaneously. Consequently, the innate simultaneity of sound(s) leaves the singer and his voice in a state of constant controlled turbulence (Süzükei 2010: 34).

The Tuvan musical tradition managed to retain its continuity until the Soviet regime (Süzükei 2010: 211). After that, the Soviets enforced its codification according to academic standards. Tuvan musical practices were thus evaluated and transformed through unfamiliar rules of academic music (ibid.). Despite this process, the throat singing debuted in its pure, non-professionalised form in 1934 in records produced by the Moscow Sound Recording Factory at the request of the government of the Tuvan People's Republic. It was welcomed warmly as 'an extraordinary example of creative human fantasy in the realm of sound' (ibid.: 212-213). Today, the tradition of throat singing and Tuvan music flourishes mostly in the international scene, with an annual international festival of *khöömei* that attracts primarily foreign musicians from the US

and Europe. There are numerous professional groups of throat singers in Kyzyl, such as Alash and Hun-Hur-Tu; however, their performances in Kyzyl are rather sporadic. Most of the time they tour around the world, with recordings and distribution of music occurring primarily outside of Russia.

The elusive characteristics of Tuvan throat singing have challenged numerous ethnographers who have attempted to delineate the production of sound in *khöömei* through concepts such as aesthetics, mimesis or folk philosophy (Levin 2006; Levin & Edgerton 1999; Hodgkinson 2005/2006). For instance, Levin and Edgerton argue that throat singers interact with the natural sound world through imitating the sounds of the places and beings (1999: 82). In particular, they copy those sounds of nature that offer rich harmonics, such as wind or water (ibid.). Consequently, throat singing is like drawing a picture of the landscape (an image), and thus its essence lies in a mimetic faculty, with the ‘mimetic impulse’ being triggered by ‘perceptual immediacy’ (Levin 2006: 78). Conversely, Hodgkinson argues that throat singers are not mimetically replicating the sounds of nature and thus creating images, but rather ‘transmitting their inner experience triggered by what they see’ (2005/2006: 7). In this way, music is said to converge into an aesthetic concept equivalent to the Western idea of philosophy (ibid.: 6). However, rather than concentrating on what throat singing is about, for the purpose of my discussion I primarily focus on the structural aspect of the sound unit. Given this, in order to understand how sound is constructed in *khöömei*, it is essential to compare the throat singing tradition to classical and academic treatments of music and musical composition.

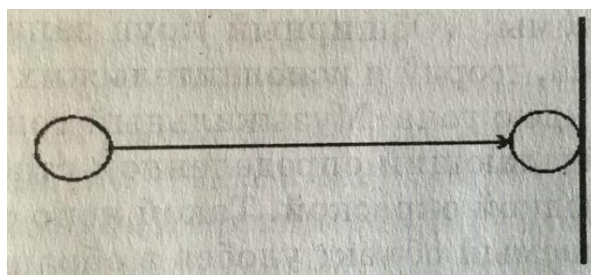
## **2.2. Classical theories of music and Tuvan throat singing<sup>28</sup>**

In classical music, based on the twelve note system and the equal temperament (Babbitt 1960, Duffin 2007), styles, theories and performances are based on the

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<sup>28</sup> It is essential to point out that development of a ‘theory’ of throat singing as well as any scientific treatments of Tuvan music began only in the 1940s (Süzükei 2010: 4). Before that, any theoretical readings of throat singing and Tuvan music in general were non-existent. Nevertheless, in this thesis, I argue that particular traits of sound structure illuminated by Tuvan ethnomusicologists over the last twenty years refer to and draw on wider ideas about and potentialities of Tuvan ontology that can be traced to important factors outside the realm of music and thus become informative of Tuvans’ ways of engagement with the world.

concept of tone. Tone constitutes a pure sound with precisely defined stable pitch and strength. Each tone occupies a strict position on the pitch scale; if changed, the position may lead to the destruction of the purity of the sound (as in the instances when a singer suddenly begins to sing out of tune). Subsequently, any composition is organised around a specific conception of rhythm. In short, tones progress through a clear form that has a certain duration and that moves towards the prepared conclusion (Khlynov 2010: 194). Moreover, in classical musical composition, in order to produce melody, a new sound has to be produced each time from a different source, and to move from one sound to another one needs a physical movement – changing pitch by, for example, pressing strings (Süzükei 2010: 33). In this way, melody is constructed from discrete sounds, sounds coordinated through independent row-organised pitch scales. In very simplistic terms, sound is packed into isolated independent tones and oriented outwardly. Most importantly, any composition constitutes a unified structure that can easily be copied and learned and which is arranged into fixed music notations (Khlynov 2010: 194) (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** Sound unit in the classical (twelve tone) musical system (Süzükei 2010: 33).

The essential difference between the classical or academic conception of sound and sound in throat singing is that Tuvan music cannot be correlated with row-organised and linear structuring; it does not constitute a unified and copyable structure. In *khöömei*, the sound emerges from a drone-overtone system, a system in which a central sound – drone is being split into its partial overtones. It is a system based on the subordination and coordination of the fundamental sound and its parts. Therefore, music in throat singing is timbre-centred rather than pitch-centred (Süzükei 2010: 32-

35). In short, the basic sound opens up and produces a variety of overtones; thus, drone and overtones become an inseparable whole. They are mutually dependent. In this way, any sound unit or sound ‘atom’ in *khöömei* resembles a spreading fan. Inside, there is a whole acoustic world created by the spray of overtones. In other words, as emphasised by Walentyna, sound in throat singing avoids any strict motif, regular rhythm or melody in order to establish the timbral qualities of the drone-overtone sound. Rather than repeatedly producing a new sound from a different source, the melodic alternation of overtones occurs against the background of uninterrupted and constantly sounding drones (Khlynov 2010: 194). In this way, sound in *khöömei* is centripetal, which means that the parts (overtones) are directed and drawn towards the centre (drone). Consequently, the drone and its overtones exist simultaneously (Süzükei 2010: 34). This simultaneity constructs a space of turbulence in which the singer and his voice are constantly enmeshed whilst performing *khöömei*. What the audience hear is not a unified structure of pure tones, but rather timbral richness and wide range of free overtones (see Figure 10).



**Figure 10:** Sound unit in throat singing *khöömei* (Süzükei 2010: 33).

As a result, *khöömei* constitutes a distinct form of music with particular and unique features. As Walentyna explained it to me, each melody is different. It cannot ever be repeated in exactly the same way, and thus cannot and should not be codified in any written form. Given this, throat singers are recognised not by the pieces they sing, but rather by their voices. As Walentyna put it, sound in Tuva constitutes a holographic rather than a photographic image and is akin to a snowball; when thrown, one can notice how the snow sprays. Alternatively, one can think about the sound unit

as a diamond with multiple reflections on its surface, or a snow globe. In other words, to hear things the Tuvan way is to be able to sense and appreciate these delicate nuances of sounds, to notice each evasive spray of the drone and to grasp every multifaceted reflection.

Given these complex and context-dependent characteristics, Walentyna was always disturbed when people suggested that throat singing could be codified and learned from musical notation: ‘you cannot put this into a unified equation’ she would always insist, as *khöömei* is supposed to be learned only by listening. ‘People always need an image, something tangible you can rely on. Throw yourself into the sea of throat music and you become disoriented. You try to get out by calling it an imitation, a picture of landscape or even an independent music genre or music avant-garde, otherwise, you are lost’, she would always conclude our heated discussions. Indeed, the theoretical understanding of music in Tuva disrupts, to a certain extent, academic or classical thinking about sound, turning it upside down and instead embodying the lack of ‘logical’ and universally codified ideas about musical composition. Music in Tuva constitutes a non-linear or variant system, divested of an ordered sequence of tones. Rather than a sequentially organised structure, the essence of sound production in *khöömei* lies in the opening up of a drone into multiple overtones. Consequently, sound in throat singing offers the structure of variance and centripetalism, a cluster of interdependent parts that, in order to exist, must remain immersed in the state of controlled turbulence, that is, interrelated with and through the fundamental sound, the centre.

Having established the distinct features of sound unit in *khöömei*, the properties of centripetalism and turbulence, in the final section of this chapter, I am going to show how this structure of sound is homologous to the structural organisation of space in shamanic rituals involving curses. Within this structure, the drum occupies a focal position in the ritual event similar to the position of the drone in *khöömei*. I shall begin my discussion with an ethnographic vignette describing a curse deflection ritual performed for two members of Hovalygymaa’s family.

### 3. Structure of shamanic rituals

One day, Hovalygmaa and I went to visit her two nephews, Sajan and Bajlak. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Tuvans often arrange meetings with a shaman in order to get a form of a ‘check-up’ and deflect any possible curses. This was the case with the brothers we were about to visit. Departing in the early morning, we left the arrays of blocks of flats behind us and arrived at the outskirts of the city, populated with dilapidated wooden houses where the brothers lived. The older brother, Bajlak, was a twenty-eight-year-old local ‘mafioso’, as he described himself. He was recently divorced, and suffered from a particular flair for drinking, which resulted in constant fights and problems with the police. The younger brother, twenty-three-year-old Sajan, was a rising star in wrestling and was about to represent Tuva in a national wrestling competition in Mongolia. The house they lived in had low ceilings and gave an impression of randomly organised boxes that someone had put together and turned into a living space. We all sat in the living room where we were given food, take-away noodles from the nearby canteen. Curious neighbors and relatives looked into the house and, encouraged by the shaman, decided to join us for the ritual. The room filled with people, and the shaman focused on the two brothers. In the end, we were joined by four men and a woman who carried a newborn baby. One of the men, however, was asked to leave as the shaman found him ‘clean’ (*aryg*), in the sense that he did not suffer from any curses.

After an hour of preparation and chatting, the shaman began the process of cleansing the brothers. Everyone, with the exception of myself was asked to remove their hats as the shaman was about to deflect any curses from the spectators as well. The shaman lit juniper and directed smoke towards each person while spitting under their arms. She also used blessed juniper to mark certain areas of the room separating the space in which spirits were expected to arrive from the rest of the flat. Then, she took her drum and sat on a chair, humming softly and very quietly. *Duvulendir dingmirej beer dungurumny* – ‘the drum (the sound of the drum) causes thunder and loud lightning while triggering turbulence’, she began to sing. Suddenly, her voice strengthened and turned into a gurgling laughter. Then, she relapsed into humming as if nursing a child to sleep. A moment later, she jumped and shouted: ‘*hyshh hyshh*’ as

if pushing away a nasty animal. Her voice became stronger as she began to drum loudly and to sing *algys* – a shamanic hymn. Suddenly, someone aggressively knocked on the door. No one responded. The shaman remained focused on the clients. She was drumming louder and louder, her voice at its highest pitch and strength. I knew it was the moment when she was forcing the spirits that brought curses to leave. The baby on the woman's arm started to cry and she had to breastfeed it, which irritated the shaman. A few minutes later, one of the brothers' cousins showed up and decided to join the ritual. The shaman continued playing the drum and, now gently humming, asked the spirits for their blessing and good luck for the brothers.

In between the chants, she revealed there was a spirit living in the flat intending to curse Sajan, which forced her to prolong the process of deflecting the curse as she had to summon more spirits and adjust her chant. After a short break, the shaman concentrated on the remaining clients. As she instructed me on a number of occasions, regardless of her physical state she was not allowed to stop a ritual halfway through or refuse to help a member of the community who asked her for help. She performed a short song in front of the next client and moved along towards the cousin who had arrived halfway through the ritual. Suddenly, her voice became faster and louder. She started screaming and shouting at everyone to step back. We sprang to our feet and gathered in a corner while observing the scene. The shaman began spinning and crying out loud. We heard her singing:

What the fuck is this?

Black stamp has been marked.

(...) Get rid of the black stamp! Tears have been shed/hidden.

Someone on the horse is stalking from behind.

From way behind the mountains and hills

there is a bitch (a woman) crying a blood tear

waiting for the child!

Her cold arm stretching towards

your child!

What the fuck,

There is a danger of a curse



what do we need this evil for  
there is something else coming from another place  
something that has been summoned!

*Kandaaj chiivel? Tölüngerger kara tangma bazyp kaap dyr.*  
*Bazyp kaany kara tangma hajladyngar!*  
*Karyg chatka kylyp kaap dyr, dengerlerim!*  
*Karak chazjyn kaap dyr. Kara sungu chazjyp kaap dyr.*  
*Azjyg cunгу chazjyp kap dyr.*  
*Tölüngerning artynajdan, A”tтыg kizji kedep choruur.*  
*Artar-cynnar artynajda. Eshpi kizji yglap orar. gerni manap orar.*  
*Cook holun cunup algan tölünerezje!*  
*Kandaaj chiivel?*  
*Kargysh-chatka ajyly-dyr! Aza-buktung heree-le dir!*  
*Öcke churttan kelgen chiive dir. Kygyj-bile kelgen chiive dir.*

The shaman sat next to the terrified man who cringed, holding his knees. His whole posture suddenly shrunk and he looked like a petrified child. The shaman hid the man’s face with the drum and asked one of us to bring a glass of water. She asked him to drink it fast, as if it was the last drop of water he could get. We all stood still waiting for her to tell us what to do. The shaman reluctantly explained to us what happened. She detected a very strong curse, inflicted with mutton’s blood by a powerful shaman from a village. It turned out the man was a suspect in a murder case. The family of the murdered woman, convinced of his guilt, decided to send him a death curse. Water, offered by the shaman, was meant to restore energy balance within the man and prevent his body from immediate drying and subsequent death, which is one of the forms in which the strongest curses materialise themselves. We all went outside while the shaman arranged a curse deflection ritual with the frightened man. He thanked her profusely and offered 500 rubles (approximately five pounds), although the regular offering was 100 rubles (one pound). I asked the shaman if the man was

guilty. She shook her head. ‘If he was, *Erlik*<sup>29</sup> spirits would have arrived. They did not. The man is innocent’.

As presented in the vignette, the drum marks the beginning of ritual proceedings and accompanies diverse occurrences that unfold in the wake of its sounds. More than that, the sudden arrival of the ‘innocent’ man and the way his presence is incorporated in the shamanic ritual, along with other unexpected developments such as detecting death curse and discovering the presence of another spirit in the house, indicate a fundamental difference between the fashion in which ritual has usually been conceptualised within anthropology. Lastly, in order to engage with the machinery of curse, the shaman has to produce a particular kind of turbulent space, which allows her to unmake previous configurations and undertake negotiations with spirits while generating new cosmic arrangements in the form of curse infliction or deflection. In this way, the efficacy of the shaman’s work is contingent on inconsistency and variance, exemplified in the semi-controlled turbulent characteristics of the event. Thus, the components of the ritual, centred around the shamanic drum, function in a structurally centripetal way, homologous to the structure of sound unit in *khöömei*. In order to illustrate my argument, in what follows, I compare different strategies of ritualization in both shamanic and liturgical orders in the context of space production.

### **3.1. Liturgical order versus shamanic ritual**

The process of space production in any ritual context is contingent on ritualization, understood, in a general sense, as a distinct and intended form of acting performed through a combination of different physical movements (Bell 1992: 109). Thus, ritual becomes a form of a social strategy that allows for the construction of certain power relations and ritualized bodies leading towards particular ends, for instance rectification of a given problem (ibid.: 89). Ritualization is differentiated from other forms of acting through formalisation and periodization, but also through deliberate informality (ibid.: 220). While generating particular relations between

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<sup>29</sup> Erlik is one of the gods sometimes compared by my informants to the Christian Satan or devil. There are also small Erlik spirits that can both help as well as disturb people depending on the context, which I briefly described in Chapter Two.

people and spaces, it can be broadly defined only to a limited extent, as it is always contextually determined (ibid.: 93). Drawing on this, there are fundamental differences in the way ritual space and events are produced in shamanic rituals as compared to the way in which, for instance, rituals are arranged in Christian order, illuminating wider contrasts in the patterns of being in the world.

In his discussion of ritual and ritual performance, Rappaport defines ritual form as ‘more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performer’ (1999: 24). The most formalised behavioural patterns are expected to prevail in religious rituals (ibid.: 35). Thus, in liturgical orders events are organised around conventional elements, such as decorous gestures and postures, whilst behaviour tends to be repetitive and punctilious. These elements are arranged in time and space in a more or less fixed manner (ibid.: 35-37) while maintaining the relations of order as opposed to chaos and disorder (ibid.) Along these lines, Rappaport illuminates the importance of invariance, stressing the narrow choices participants are offered in rituals, such as to take the communion or not. As he concludes, these are the formal options strictly specified by the performed order (ibid.: 41). Unquestionably though, as he also points out, even the most invariant liturgical orders are open to and sometimes demand variation (ibid.: 37). Nonetheless, what is crucial is the fact that the formal end of the ritual towards which such events are directed is not influenced (ibid.: 39). In other words, variance or, as I shall put it, inconsistency, is not blocking any transitions key to the ultimate formal finale of the ritual. In this way, the ritual events proceed more or less coherently towards a particular final aim, such as communion or absolution, from a point A, outside the church/profane, towards a point B, the altar/sacred. As in classical music, which requires an organised sequence of tones in order to produce melody, rituals demand ‘fixed sequences of acts and utterances following each other in order’ (ibid.: 35) allowing them to reach a conclusion or final destination.

I would like to suggest that the structural organisation of Tuvan shamanic ritual is different. Crucially, rather than being structured around an ordered sequence of events leading to a transition from position A to position B, the ritual is characterised by a variant (turbulent) movement of different elements turned in and interdependent on the drum, which generates the opening and the unsettlement of cosmos.

Consequently, the ensuing structure and the proceedings of the ritual are contingent on a receptiveness to interruptions and inconsistencies by anyone and anything; for instance, the sudden materialisation of the spirit living in the house, the unexpected arrival of the cousin or an incidental detection of a death curse.

At the beginning of the ritual, the shaman addresses the spirits by saying that the sound of the drum creates whirls and thunders. Once the shaman begins drumming, the space of the ritual begins to open up in a similar way to a fan. The sounds of the drum start to instigate turbulence – ‘the sound of my drum creates whirlwinds/turbulence’ – sings the shaman. All of the sudden, the room becomes filled with clients, the arriving spirits, the ill wishing ancestor and a woman with a blood tear. The shaman, as an artisan or virtuoso, plays the drum while subtly modulating and managing the clients, and the spirits; in other words, navigating the turbulent or ‘timbral’ character of the ritual. The occurrences in the ritual are further reconfigured with the sudden arrival of another cousin, abrupt knocks on the door and the child crying and demanding food. Like reflections on water or reflections in a diamond, these elements constantly position and reposition themselves, become more or less present and contingent on the work of the shaman and her drumming and the extent to which she focuses on different elements of the ritual – the clients, the spirits, curses, diagnosis, negotiations etc. Whilst doing so, she continues to sit still in one place for the most of the ritual, which reinforces the central and static position of the drum in the event. Thus, whilst remaining in the centre of unstable events, the drum bounds up and maintains in a relationship of dependency numerous elements, including the shaman, the terrified client and the spirits responsible for both deflecting and inflicting curses. Variance occurs through the constant interchange of the elements without any concrete, formal order – the cry of the baby, the spirit observing and plotting against the client, the arrival of the woman with a blood tear – a variance very similar to the mechanics of timbre and the way it develops in throat singing. In other words, the space within which ritual occurs is produced through ‘spatially diffused points (...) not as links in a chain, but as dispersions in a single place’ (Poulantzas 1980: 101) organised around and interwoven with the central element, the drum. Consequently, rather than a transition from a point A to point B, from sin to absolution, the structure of the ritualistic event remains inconsistent whilst being contingent on and shaped by

the (mis)management of sociocosmic relations, exemplified through the process of inflicting or deflecting curses.

Interestingly, there are further parallels between the organisational structure of a musical piece in *khöömei* and shamanic rituals. As mentioned earlier, in throat singing the melody is unique, in the sense that it cannot be repeated again in exactly the same way. Consequently, as stressed by Walentyna, the perception of a melodic structure is unimportant for experienced listeners. Rather, such listeners' sensory focus is on the timbral palette organised not by a melodic structure, but by something that can be compared, according to my friend, to expressionist gestures. In a similar way, the shamans claim that each chant and sound production ushered during the ritual is unique and contingent on the mood and needs of the spirits. Moreover, the shamans rarely seem to remember what they sang about and often the elements of the ritual are instantly forgotten. In this way, similarly to individual pieces in throat singing, separate shamanic rituals cannot be codified and narrowed to more or less invariant sequences of events and utterances. Their efficacy is contingent on the opening up and unsettlement of the universe facilitated by the drum and demands interruptions as well as unexpected occurrences.

### **3.2. A few final notes on the notion of the centre**

As I have tried to emphasise, the spatial organisation of shamanic rituals arranged around the shamanic drum reveals centripetal features that also prevail in the structure of sound unit in *khöömei* as well as echo the concentric structure of personhood, contingent on the central element of *sünezin*. Interestingly, this kind of structuring permeates, to a certain extent, other aspects of Tuvan existence. As it was explained to me by one of my informants, Walentyna, among Tuvans there is a particular stress placed on the movement from the whole (centre) to its parts, which today is formally most evident in throat singing. However, it used to prevail in other elements of life. Despite being 'archaic' and rarely recognised, I am including a few examples of this phenomenon in this analysis as possible proof of the wider significance that centripetalism seems to have in Tuvan ontology.

The significance of the shift from the whole to its parts, rather than the other way around, echoes understandings of time arrangements that become obvious when comparing the Tuvan and Russian languages. For instance, in the Russian language half past eight (Rus. *'polovina deviatovo'*) translates as 'the half of the ninth hour' and suggests a shift from the part to the whole. For Tuvans, this concept is confusing as they are more accustomed to the reversed logic. Eight thirty (*ses shak thartyk*) translates as eight-hour half' implying a shift from the whole to its parts. This, in turn, produces many funny anecdotes about Tuvans missing their flights, buses or appointments.

Another context in which the relation between the centre and its parts is exemplified in the centripetal understanding relates to musical instruments. Before the arrival of the Soviets, when playing string instruments called *byzaanchy*, Tuvans used to employ a particular technique focusing on touching the strings in order to produce music. Rather than pressing them from above, they used to place the fingers underneath the strings and, in this way, make music. In the process of the 'professionalization' of Tuvan traditional music conducted by the Soviets, this technique was lost. Nevertheless, as Walentyna suggested, this particular way of performing was based on sound production embedded in the movement from the whole – the center of the instrument – to its parts, that is, the strings rather than the other way around, displayed in academic techniques of playing musical instruments (Süzükei 2010: 34).

### **3.3. Shamanic ritual is about an unexpected encounter**

In her definition of ritualization, Bell argues that the production of space and time as well as ritualized bodies occurs through organised schemes of privileged oppositions and hierarchy, such as higher (spiritual) and lower (mundane) (1992: 98). Furthermore, as she writes, 'ritualization sees its end, the rectification of a problem. It does not see how it actively creates the place, it does not see what it does in the process of realising this end, the transformation of the problematic itself. It does not see how its own actions reorder and reinterpret the circumstances' (ibid.: 109). In a rather different fashion, the outcome of the shamanic ritual is contingent on what is going to

happen during it. Indeed, we can delineate neat oppositions in shamanic rituals; for instance, the separation of the shaman from the client where the client sits on the floor and the shaman is situated on a chair. Nevertheless, in contrast to Bell's argument about ritualization, the essence of the ritual is exactly the uncertain construction of the place and what occurs within it, which consequently influences the outcome. Along these lines, the space of the ritual is opened up in order to allow the arrival of new spirits and new happenings. The shamans have no certainty about what this space will contain and are prepared to find in it something new each time, which dovetails with pereceptions of the cosmos as intrinsically turbulent and constantly in motion.

In recent anthropological studies of cosmologies, anthropologists have criticised the previous trends to depict cosmology as a state of ordered sociality emerging from chaos (Sahlins 1996) and focused on elucidating the shifting and fragmented patterns of cosmic movements (Pedersen 2011; Mikkelsen 2016; Pedersen and Willerslev 2010). For instance, Pedersen and Willerslev argue that in North Asia, due to a lack of ontological fullness triggered by economic and political transformations, cosmologies are more fragile and thus require continuous maintenance (2010: 264). Drawing on this, in an example from Northern Mongolia, Pedersen describes a broken cosmos, suffering from an ontological breakdown caused by transition to market economy in the wake of Soviet disintegration (2011). In contrast to this, Mikkelsen (2016), rather than opposing chaos and order in Bugkalot cosmology, introduces a third alternative. He shows how an intrinsically chaotic cosmos becomes momentarily stabilised through human and shamanic forms of engagement. In this way, while taking chaos *seriously* (ibid.: 202, original emphasis) Mikkelsen attempts to approach fragmentation as a cosmic pattern rather than an exemplification of 'transitional cosmology' (Pedersen 2011). Echoing this approach to some extent, Witherspoon shows how, among the Navajo, all things are understood to be in a state of motion unless this motion has been somehow withdrawn (1977). Motion and stasis, therefore, like chaos and stability, constitute an essential opposition upon which the Navajo life is organised.

In a similar fashion to the Navajo and Bugkalot examples, for Tuvans the cosmos is intrinsically unstable, in the sense that it remains perpetually inconsistent and unpredictable to humans. Rather than reflecting a state of cooperative organisation

and social stability, it is permeated by ongoing instances of frictions and shifts contingent on the uncertainty of both human actions as well as gods' and spirits' moods and needs, intertwined with ongoing transformations in the world, including technological development and changes in economic and political realms. In this way, Tuvan cosmology never reveals itself as complete, but rather remains folding and unfolding in diverse, unforeseen configurations. It is the shamans who momentarily undertake attempts at (re)arranging this process, never knowing, however, which turn it might take.

The elements of uncertainty and inconsistency in shamanic rituals reverberate, for instance, in Taussig's depiction of the *yage* rituals through the lens of montage (1987), which means they are seen as 'alterations, cracks, displacements, interruptions for shitting, for vomiting, for a cloth to wipe one's face' (ibid.: 441). Similarly, for Yaminahua shamans, the cosmos is never perceived as completed and therefore every ritual space is unpredictable and contains uncertainty, which is, however, expected and desired (Townesley 1993: 466). This equally echoes the travelling patterns mentioned earlier, characterised by not reaching a specific destination but by appreciating the experiences of the unpredictability of the events and by opening yourself to unexpected encounters.

This element of the 'unexpected', along with the fact that the same structuring of the ritual event pertains to rituals dedicated to both curse infliction and deflection, illuminates additional aspects of ambiguity embedded in shamanic practice in Tuva. Crucially, there is no difference in the type of turbulence triggered by the drum that is produced for the purpose of infliction and deflection of the curse. What matters is the intention of the shaman performing the ritual and the efficacy of their performance (which I shall discuss in the following chapter). Thus, rather than perceiving shamanic practice through the lens of beautifying, curing or fixing the world as opposed to inflicting harm, the ethnographic context of Tuva illuminates how shamans simply confront the incessant flow of cosmic events, while establishing temporary arrangements in the form of curse infliction or deflection. These arrangements should not, however, be grasped through the opposed ideas of harm and cure as markers of (im)moral behaviour. Instead, similarly to the terms 'evil', 'black' and 'white', they constitute reports on the cosmic flow and delineate what things are or are not, rather



than emphasise the curing or damaging aspects of shamanic practice. It is important to notice, however, that there is a significant difference between the type of turbulence that is produced by the shamanic drum and the type that is produced by the throat singer and curses. This difference lies in the degree of control that a person has over the condition of turbulence. During throat singing, the singer produces controlled turbulence while responding to diverse surrounding impulses. Turbulence produced by the shamanic drum is semi-controlled, as it is partially navigated by the shaman but also involves the aspect of inconsistency. Turbulence associated with being cursed remains uncontrolled and leads to unpredictable behaviours that are beyond the victim's power.

## **Conclusion**

The Tuvan cosmos constitutes a system that is permanently in a state of flux. Within this system, turbulence is a notion that traverses diverse aspects of life in Tuva, including the immediate experiences of cursing, mobility patterns, sound and the structural organisation of shamanic rituals. In this chapter, I have argued that the patterning of space and events in rituals involving curses is contingent on the shamanic drums. Given its particular power, described as potency to create whirls or swirls, the drum constitutes a centre of the ritual event that unsettles and opens up a given cosmic configuration; allowing the shamans to undertake negotiations with spirits within it. While accompanying diverse occurrences in the ritual, the drum maintains all the elements of the ritual, i.e. the shaman, the client and the spirits in the relationship of continuous interdependency. I have proposed that this process can be effectively grasped through comparisons with the structure of the sound unit in *khöömei*. Moreover, contrasting approaches to sound in classical music and in throat singing with the study of liturgical and shamanic orders allows us not only to elucidate how the organisational structure of shamanic ritual is generated, but also to illuminate the intrinsic features of inconsistency and uncertainty upon which this structure and the success of the ritual depend.

Moreover, I would venture to argue that, through this comparison, we can elucidate a particular distinctive feature between different perceptions of being and world in general. During one of the interviews I conducted with a local journalist, Sajana, she explained to me what she perceived as discrepancies in Russian and Tuvan understandings of the world. In her fierce critique of Sovietisation, she stated that the essential difference lies in the fact that a Russian, when witnessing a sunrise, will count how much they can achieve till the end of the day. A Tuvan, as she put it, will sit still in one place and absorb the moment as if remaining immersed in the place. While recalling this very short ethnographic vignette, I notice some particular similarities in the patterns illustrated in Sajana's observations and the process of ritualization discussed in this chapter on the example of the Christian mass and shamanic ritual. Nonetheless, given the broadness of this assumption, I shall leave it for, perhaps, future investigation.

In this chapter, through an exploration of the similarities and connections between throat singing and shamanic practice, I have shown how the significance of sound exemplifies and brings together most of the themes I have emphasised – themes like the role of the drum, the structural characteristic of events during the ritual as well as the importance of turbulence and centripetalism. In the next chapter, I am going to take my discussion of sound a step further by concentrating on the agency of the shaman's voice – a sound upon which the successful infliction or deflection of curses and the overall efficacy of shamanic performance depends. In this way, I show how, while the sounds of the drum unsettle the cosmic arrangements through producing turbulence, the sounds generated by the shamanic vocal apparatus do the opposite – that is, they confront the turbulence and (re)arrange things through curse infliction or deflection.

## Chapter five

### The role of shamanic voice and the agency of sound in the phenomenon of cursing

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how shamanic rituals involving curses are centred around the drum, the sounds of which produce a particular turbulent space characterised by inconsistency and uncertainty. This spatial unsettlement remains indispensable for performing cursing practices. Within the turbulent space generated by the drum, shamans undertake the attempt to negotiate with spirits while asking for curses to be either removed or inflicted. This process of negotiation, rather than being achieved through significant alternations in physical or psychic states, associated in classical anthropological studies with trance-like experiences, is contingent on distinct ways of sound(s) production, originating primarily from the shaman's voice (*üñ*). In this chapter, I am going to show how the sounds produced by the shaman's voice, unlike the unsettling sounds of the drum, (re)arrange things during the ritual while forging new configurations which remain, however, always uneasy and always at risk of being distorted and repositioned.

More than that, I am going to explore how sounds produced by the shaman are imbued with an autonomy of their own and act, therefore, as triggers of communication rather than mere vehicles of meaning. In so doing, the chapter engages with a variety of sounds produced by the shaman's voice, including sounds divested of any semantic meaning, such as howls and cries, as well as sounds produced through the utterance of words, particularly, shamanic chants (*algys*). The main argument rests on the premise that sounds are not 'the purely sonorous matter of language' (Severi 2015: 247), but rather autonomous – that is, they have potency of their own. In this way, rather than creating meaning through words, shamans communicate with clients and spirits through the emission of sounds unconcerned with any phonetic transcription. It is the

sounds that act ‘as the trigger and vehicle (...) for carving out intentional form and movement’ (Espirito Santo 2015: 585). In short, the clients respond to sounds made by the shamans as well as to alternations in the shamans’ voice, rather than to a chanted narrative, while performing different physical reactions, such as jumping, grabbing different objects or crying. Given this, the chapter illuminates how, during the shamanic rituals, chants and instructions composed of intelligible and comprehensible words only provide a contextual background for the events whereas the act of communication with spirits is forged by a variety of sounds originating from the shaman’s voice.

Moreover, this chapter discusses how shamans generate an indexical presence of spirits through sounds, which triggers different tactile, aural and visual experiences in the audience, described by the clients as a cold wind (*hat*), a murmur (*shimeen*) or a partial image of a spirit (*dürzü*). In this way, shamans, rather than mirroring the world of things that sound, through playing the vocal cords imbue sounds with ontological potency and actualise spirits. Along these lines, while concentrating on the agency of sounds, the chapter illuminates how sounds’ modulation and different articulation techniques, whilst forging and navigating interactions with spirits, concurrently produce the relations of efficacy between the shaman and spirits as well as the shaman and the clients. These relations remain indispensable to the successful removal or infliction of curse. Given this, the chapter shows how the process of sound production intertwines with the politics of legitimation of shamanic skills. Consequently, shamanic ritual, rather than constituting a symbolic structure, becomes ‘a set of techniques for including certain types of experience, and asking about the types of significance attributed to these experiences’ (Townesley 1993: 466).

In order to delineate my argument, I divide this chapter into three main sections. Firstly, while presenting an ethnographic example of a curse deflection ritual, I focus on the agency of sounds produced by the shamanic voice and discuss their significance for ritual happenings. In the second section of the chapter, I concentrate on different ways of articulating sounds and explore their implications for the relations between shamans, spirits and clients. Lastly, I explore the efficacy of shamanic practice and the politics of legitimation intertwined with accurate sound production while showing how the success of the ritual is contingent on, on the one hand, different

physical effects that have to be experienced by the client and, on the other hand, ‘proper listening’ (*dyngnaar, dyngnaalaar*) that is expected from the audience by the shamans and spirits.

## 1. The agency of sound

The agentive role of sounds and musical performance have been discussed in a variety of ethnographic settings. For instance, Feld shows how among the Kaluli linguistic and musical patterns are derived iconically from natural sounds, such as bird calls and waterfalls, providing a variety of communicative possibilities (2012). In a similar fashion, Basso (1985) explores how among the Kalapalo, ritual is considered as a unique expressive event that constructs and clarifies ‘fundamental cosmological ordering principles’ (ibid.: 6) through the heightened forms of musical expression. Along these lines, Seeger (1987) discusses how songs constitute an essential validation of the interactions between humans and animals. As he argues, singing allows to (re)establish the cosmos in its ‘accurate’ order with time, space and people being controlled through singing (1987.: 132).

As discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, everyday life in Tuva is deeply permeated by the significance of sounds. In a similar fashion to the aforementioned ethnographic examples, they are imbued with different potentialities and can facilitate the means of communication, allow for orientation in space and time and constitute a core of Tuvan aesthetics as a part of the ‘traditional art’ of throat singing, *khöömei*. When talking about the notion of sound in general, Tuvans use the terms *daash* or *shimeen*, which literally translate as ‘noise’. Nevertheless, the Tuvan language offers a rich lexicon of words that provide detailed descriptions of different sounds. These are primarily onomatopoeic expressions and their meaning depends on the source of the sound. For example, as explained to me by Walentyna, *kyiyraash* describes the sound made whilst walking on hard snow, while *kyiyrt* means ‘crunch’, ‘creak’ or ‘crackle’; *torulaash*, derived from *torga* (‘woodpecker’), refers to sounds of a woodpecker, whereas *syylaash* mentioned earlier, points to a high-frequency whistling sound often produced by children.

As presented in the previous chapter, shamanic rituals are spatially organised around the drum and its sounds, which remain central to diverse occurrences. During a ritual event, the sound of the drum may be accompanied by other sounds, for instance, that of the shamanic costume (if it is worn by the shaman), the sounds of different shamanic instruments, such as protective *eeren* and the sounds of *algys*, the shamanic chant. This ceremonial ‘soundscape’ is constantly intertwined with the sounds sipping from the outside of the flat or house where the ritual takes place, including the sounds of cars, phones or peoples’ conversations. Within this complex acoustic tapestry, the most important, apart from the sounds of the drum, are sounds generated by the shamanic voice as it is primarily through the means of their articulation that the shaman can undertake negotiations with spirits. This, in turn, facilitates a fragile arrangement of sociocosmic interactions exemplified in curse infliction or deflection, and settles the turbulent space generated by the drum. However, before exploring these processes any further, I am going to substantiate and contextualise my analysis with an ethnographic vignette, which in a vivid manner illuminates the agentive power of sounds produced by the shamanic voice and their implications for the occurrences in the ritual as well as its overall efficacy.

### **1.1. The story of Ajdyn**

When I began observing different shamans in ritual settings I became used to a repertoire of sonic elements that most of them were incorporating in their practices. These components usually included the clanging and crackling of the shamanic coat, delicate jangling of the bells attached to different instruments, and the rhythmical sounds of the drum intertwined with the shamans’ singing (*alganyrar*). Nonetheless, it was not until Hovalygmaa and I revisited Ajdyn, the client suffering from a horrific death curse inflicted by a spirit in the form of a woman with a blood tear (detection of this curse was presented in detail in Chapter Four) when I abruptly became familiar with the full spectrum of possibilities that the shaman’s voice and their deeply sounded performance can offer, allowing me thereby to grasp the efficacy of sounds in the processes of both inflicting and deflecting curses.

Five days after we visited Sajan's and Bajlak's flat where the unexpected visit of a neighbour – Ajdyn – led to a detection of a powerful death curse, the shaman and I arrived at Ajdyn's flat in order to conduct a curse deflection ritual. Ajdyn was a middle-aged man, tall and athletic, working in Kyzyl as a taxi driver. He lived near the banks of the Yenisei river along with his five children, wife and his mother. Ajdyn picked us up from the shaman's house in the early afternoon. He was wearing a grey tracksuit and remained completely silent on the way to his flat, which strongly contrasted with the shaman's incessant flow of words describing her recent encounter with new clients in Krasnoyarsk. We parked the car next to one of the numerous blocks of flats and Ajdyn carefully took the shaman's drum. We followed him to the staircase that led to black heavy metal doors, behind which a one-bedroom apartment was hidden, with a small kitchen and even smaller bathroom. Children were jumping and playing around; his mother sat at the kitchen table and studied me very carefully; Ajdyn's wife chatted with the kids while preparing food. As usual we commenced our visit with a meal and a long discussion, which concentrated this time on another story about a wedding curse and a petty criminal that married one of Ajdyn's relatives against the family's will. While talking, Ajdyn's wife and her mother continued to cast suspicious looks in my direction and eventually decided to completely ignore my presence. I was asked to sit in the corner for the duration of the ritual, away from the family gathered on the sofa, whilst the shaman prepared her costume and the drum. Everyone was told to cover their heads with hats, except for Ajdyn who sat at the far right of the couch and tightly held a special knife (*orzee*) offered by the shaman which was used only in the presence of death curses or clan curses. When everyone was ready the shaman hid in the corner, away from our sight. As usual, Hovalygmāa began her work with a long, piercing howl that sounded like a wolf. What took place afterwards, however, left me shivering for the rest of the day and reverberated in my head and in my dreams for many days later. With no warning, the shaman's howl abruptly changed into a loud scream, a sort of petrifying cry that randomly rose and fell only to transform into a nasty, mean laughter, resembling a squawk of a crow, intertwined with quiet howling. Next, the shaman engaged in a fifteen-minute sonic performance which included a mixture of soothing humming and squeaking laughter combined with hissing, whistling and roaring, accompanied by the sounds of the drum. At times, she

sounded like a nasty, evil creature only to abruptly transform her voice into a long beautiful cry as if nursing a child to sleep.

The shaman finished the first part of the ritual by hitting the floor twice with a wooden stick. ‘They are here, do not look at me and cover your head with your hands or they will steal your *süinezin*’, she announced, a common warning in the presence of spirits. She ran around the flat with her *eeren* shaking the little bells attached to it and moving her arms as if she was sweeping the room. In the second stage of the ritual the shaman, while continuing to drum, began to sing the shamanic chant, allowing her voice to rise and fall and shift swiftly from heavy and deep crescendos to softer and thus seemingly faster passages. She stopped every ten or so minutes, each time instructing the client and his family what they should concentrate their thoughts on and reminding them to carefully listen to her voice. Below I provide fragments of the narrative the shaman sang during this stage of the ritual.

*Azyglarym spirits, chetkelerim spirits clean up my child  
disasters push them away  
chatka kargysh curse  
take them away dwellers of the lower sky  
aza chetker spirits move them away  
send them away  
my gods from the upper sky, ohooo.  
I am asking for mercy and turning with my head upwards to you  
my gods from the upper sky  
Misfortune- make it not come  
Clean up the dirty child  
send away aza spirits  
separate all the obstacles  
the dwellers of the lower sky, ohooo.  
open the roads in my land  
melt away 3 misfortunes  
Push away 4 bad lucks  
Cut off 5 misfortunes*



*my gods from the upper sky, ohooo.*

*Azyglarym uchtii dashtyi aryglangar chetkelerim ooj,  
Haj-la halan, haj-la bachyt chok-la bolza öleng cherden chajladyngar,  
Kalgan kizji kargysh-chatka yradyn gar burgannarym ooj,  
Örsheel dileesh öritejleen,  
Halap-choruk keldirbenger,  
Hovuzjukung kazylgayn, azjy-tölge kylyp ürzjee ooj,  
Doora-here chajladyngar, doora-bakty adyryngar, üsh-le halap estip,  
Dört-le hajny chajladyngar, höj-le halap üzükte-le,  
Burgannarym ooj!*

The chant lasted for about twenty minutes. Throughout the entire ritual I was discreetly looking at Ajdyn and his family trying to follow some of their reactions. Two of the children and the women were sitting still, their hands pressed to their chests, and carefully following the shaman's moves. The third child found particular amusement in the shaman's singing and moved around whilst discreetly dancing to the sounds produced by Hovalygmaa. The most intriguing reactions came, however, from Ajdyn. His athletic figure suddenly shrunk and his handsome face with strong features somehow softened, transforming his posture and expression into that of a terrified child, rather than a grown-up man. Moreover, Ajdyn jumped every time the shaman's voice changed into a squeaking laughter. On two occasions, as I noticed, when the shaman produced piercing cries Ajdyn grabbed his knife and held it tightly to his chest, occasionally exclaiming a loud sigh. Towards the end of the ritual, he discreetly wiped off tears from his face. After the ritual finished, he seemed to relax his body on the sofa as if regaining his manhood. When we left Ajdyn's flat, the shaman was exhausted and could barely walk down the stairs. 'I did my best, it was really hard', she told me. 'Did it work?', I asked her. 'Yes, they were listening carefully. But I will be ill for many days now', she concluded sadly.

Ajdyn's story illuminates the importance of two types of sounds generated by the shaman's voice. The first part of the ritual was dominated by sounds that do not

have any semantic meaning attached, such as howls and cries. The second part comprises sounds generated through the utterance of speech during the shamanic chant. The convergence of these two ‘types’ of sounds in the ritual context of curses introduces an interesting spin to the fashion in which sound has been conceptualised in anthropology (see, among others, Malinowski 1965, Levi-Strauss 1963, Olsen 1996, Tambiah 1968). In these approaches, the agentive role of ritual is attributed to words whilst sounds constitute ‘a side aspect in the utterance of speech’ (Severi 2015: 246). In the next section, whilst referring back to Ajdyn, I am going to illuminate how sounds generated by the shaman during the ritual possess an autonomy of their own and, thus, function as activators of communication instead of mere vehicles of meaning.

## **1.2. Sounds like words**

The importance of shamanic chants in rituals has been widely analysed in a great amount of anthropological works (among others, Levi-Strauss 1963, Humphrey 1996b, Severi 2015, Olsen 1996, Levin 2006, Basso 1985). One of the classic examples among these is Levi-Strauss’s study of the Cuna shamanic song (1963). The comparison between Levi-Strauss’s analysis and the occurrences in Ajdyn’s ritual provides an interesting contrast that allows me to substantiate the argument articulated in this chapter. In his work, Levi-Strauss concentrates on the process of curing, which is contingent on the efficacy of symbols (*ibid.*). The role of the shaman is to provide the victim with a particular language in order to render the situation of pain meaningful. Levi-Strauss argues that in this process the song offers a form of pure psychological treatment (*ibid.*: 192). The shaman, through singing, psychologically manipulates the sick organ which results in a convergence between myth and reality, and thus, between physical universe and the psychological realm (*ibid.*: 193). Consequently, the song offers a particular narrative, a myth, that recreates the real experience of the sufferer leading to the client’s abreaction achieved through identification with a mythically transmuted shaman (*ibid.*: 198). In other words, as summarised by Taylor (1996), shamanic cure is contingent on the production of a description of the shaman’s communication with spirits, usually incomprehensible to the patient, which produces an analogue of the sufferer’s state of confusion (*ibid.*: 207).

This process is facilitated through the means of symbols emerging from the song, that, in turn, equip the victim with a particular language and meaning that allows for recovery (Levi-Strauss 1963: 201). Consequently, the ritual leads to a situation, as Levi-Strauss describes it, ‘wherein all the protagonists have resumed their places and returned to an order which is no longer threatened’ (ibid.: 193).

As discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Four of this thesis, the shamans, while engaging in the machinery of cursing, actively participate in navigating sociocosmic interactions permeated by the intrinsic possibilities of turbulence. This echoes, to a certain extent, the processes by which spirits and people are meant to ‘resume their places’ (ibid.) and the cosmic dynamics within which humans and non-humans are expected to be tamed and controlled. Ethnographic examples from Tuva illuminate, however, different mechanics through which this may be facilitated. In other words, rather than through the production of symbolic language and, thus, the generation of meaning, the shaman engages in sociocosmic interactions through sounds. These sounds, while eluding speech, allow for active reconfiguration of the cosmological momentum, unique for every given ritual. In other words, rather than rendering particular physical suffering meaningful for the clients, the shaman concentrates on (re)arranging different elements of the cosmos, such as spirits and cursed personhood(s), put into direct confrontations through the sounds of the drum. In this way, shamanic voice stabilises the unsettlement generated by the drum while establishing cosmic configurations afresh. The patient, through responding to shifts in the shaman’s voice and performing different physical movements such as jumping or crying in Ajdyn’s case, becomes an active participant in this dramatic process. Thus, it is the shaman’s voice and the potency of the sounds produced by it that allow, ultimately, for a change in the client’s condition, i.e. curse deflection or, in some cases, curse infliction. In order to illustrate this argument, I shall look at the characteristics of sound production and the shaman’s voice in a more detailed manner.

As outlined in the introduction, the process of negotiating with spirits is conducted through the means of two different forms of sounds. Firstly, there are the sounds produced during the shamanic chant. Usually, the chant sung by the shaman, like the one performed in the second part of Ajdyn’s ritual, includes five stages. After each part, the shaman provides vivid instructions for the clients, delineating what they

should focus on when listening to the next part of the chant. The song, as well as the instructions, are constructed from an intelligible narrative, not qualitatively ‘different’ from ordinary language but ‘with heightened use of it’ (Tambiah 1968: 188). Secondly, the shamanic ritual, as illustrated in Ajdyn’s story, is permeated by sounds that are unconcerned with any semantic meaning and phonetic transcriptions. These sounds include a variety of screams, howls and humming, which primarily dominate in the first part of the ritual. Within this sounded context, one can pose numerous questions, such as, what actually happens when the shaman screams and laughs? Do the sounds produced by the shaman’s voice, echoing Levi-Strauss’s analysis, provide the shaman with symbolic tools? In other words, do they represent or imitate the spirit? Or, perhaps, rather than representing, are they actually the spirit? Moreover, what is the role of the narrative that shamans sing so elaborately in their chants?

In order to answer these questions, I shall refer back to the ethnography. When discussing the efficacy of shamanic rituals, my informants talked primarily about the shaman’s voice and different sounds that shamans make, rarely referring to or attributing any significance to the meaning of the words chanted in the hymn or an overall narrative. As Ajdyn explained to me, it was the shaman’s voice that made him feel as if physically lighter and thus experience relief from a death curse. Moreover, because the shaman sang very well and produced a lot of sounds, he quickly became aware of the presence of spirits and could notice them for a very brief moment, which frightened him. While sharing his observations with me, he never referred to the story the shaman described in a chant. In a similar fashion, the shamans I worked with continually stressed that the importance and efficacy of the ritual does not depend on what they sing about, but how they sing and how they produce different sounds.

In this way, the flow of the ritual proceedings is not contingent on the semantics of words, in short, ‘the magical power of words’ (Tambiah 1968), but on the manipulation of sounds, thus disturbing the customary balance between meaning and form (Severi 2015: 245). Ajdyn grabbed the knife tightly and jumped as the shaman produced different sounds from humming to loud screams and gurgling laughter. While following the shaman’s voice and shifts in intonation during singing, he sighed and finally shed a tear, which indicated the moment when the spirit leaves the cursed

victim.<sup>30</sup> As he himself explained, these reactions were independent from the narrative developed in the shamanic chant. Interestingly, on one occasion, I had a chance to observe the reactions of a foreign visitor, who participated in the curse deflection ritual and who did not understand the Tuvan language. Nonetheless, in the intensified moments of the ritual her reactions, for instance anxious jumping or pressing protective tokens to the body, were similar to the reactions of the Tuvan audience.

Given this, the occurrences in the ritual are not punctuated by alternations in the narrative, that is, a move from one scene (disasters) to another (asking gods for help). Numerous reactions, such as the aforementioned discreet outburst of tears or other sudden physical movements, are not triggered by the meaning of words. Spirits and clients respond to the changes in the shaman's voice, the sudden strengthening of it or alterations in the intonation and tempo. The core of the ritual depends, thus, on how the chant is performed rather than on what it is about or what kind of linguistic meaning it produces, regardless of the level of comprehensibility. In short, the semantics offer a contextual background for the happenings in the ritual instead of actually doing something. Consequently, rather than towards communication between spirits, shamans and the audience grasped through the means of words, the ethnographic examples from Tuva point to the importance of other codes of interactions, that is, sounds.

Within this system, I suggest that sounds generated by the shamanic voice during the ritual are not mimetic or representative, but rather have an agentive role that involves the actualisation of spirits, resulting in the production of a distinct voiced-into-being cosmos. Given this, in the next section, I am going to explore, firstly, what it implies to say a shaman actualises spirits through sounds, and, secondly, how this process is achieved through the means of voice modulation. Finally, I shall discuss what kind of effects it produces in relation to spirits and the clients.

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<sup>30</sup> As Hovalygmaa explained it to me, when clients cry during the rituals these are, in fact, tears of the spirit who does not want to leave the victim and return to their own place.

## 2. Confronting cosmos

Before engaging further with my analysis, it is essential to delineate how voice is being conceptualised among the shamans. One of the regular practices before each ritual is for the shaman to utter a long loud howl that resembles the cry of a wolf. When I commenced my work with Hovalygmaa, I was convinced that these howls constituted a plea to the helping spirits. Much to my surprise, the shaman eventually revealed to me that she was simply tuning her vocal cords. This statement illuminates a unique feature of sound production in Tuva that is embedded in an intimate relation between voice and the vocal apparatus. Indeed, vocal cords are not considered to be an element of the physical body, but rather are approached as a discrete musical instrument and thus almost a separate object. Reflecting the same idea, the art of *khöömei*, which is commonly translated into English as throat singing, constitutes the art of playing the throat. The shamans, when producing sounds and performing *algysh*, are in fact ‘playing’ their own vocal apparatus. In this way, Hovalygmaa exercises the art of conjuring the spirits while confronting and rearranging sociocosmic dynamics and voicing into existence a particular moment of an ‘intrinsically’ fragile cosmos.

### 2.1. Actualisation of spirits

In the ethnographic context of Tuva, the intertwining of sound and materiality constitutes one of the key subjects of anthropological enquiry in relation to traditional music (Levin 2006, Levin and Edgerton 1999, Hodgkinson 2005/2006). In most examples, the process of materialisation through sound is approached through the concept of mimesis and representation. For instance, the connection between music and landscape has been widely discussed in relation to throat singing by anthropologists engaged in research in Tuva. In his analysis of *khöömei*, Levin describes the concept of a ‘sonic sketch’ of landscape (2006: 73-75), which Tuvans also refer to as *boidus churumaly* (‘sketch of nature’). This ‘sketch’, as explained to me by Walentyna, is meant to be obtained through a particular kind of whistling, which offers the barest outline of a melodic motif and is intimately intertwined with the shape of the surrounding landscape. The sonic sketches are said to create a perceptual

association with a type of landscape; such as the steppe or grasslands, a steep-sided mountain, or taiga forest. Another example of the direct links between music and a particular topography is exemplified by throat-singers, who use two subtly different forms of the throat-singing style known as *kargyraa*. These styles are meant to contrast the topography of mountains ('mountain *kargyraa*') and steppe ('steppe *kargyraa*'). Interestingly, as I have observed among my informants, Tuvans find the concept of a musical sketch understood as mimesis deeply problematic. Rather, my interlocutors described the links between sounds, music and the surroundings in terms of unique relationships, one-time interactions with a place, rather than the production of discrete images.

In a similar fashion, during my discussions with Walentyna, she would often delicately criticise anthropologists' flair for reducing the notion of sound to the means of representation. This, in turn, dovetails with Ingold's arguments that 'sensory experience is assumed to *model* or *reflect* culture, rather than constitute an object of investigation proper' (2000: 283, original emphasis). As Ingold explains, we draw a distinction between the physical and cultural dimensions of perception (ibid.), on the assumption that people 'represent' their world in order to make sense of it. While drawing on Ingold's argument, Espirito Santo shows how in Cuban spirit mediumship practices, particular visions, like ritual descriptive speech, do not exist to simply or only represent, but to (re)create or refashion a world and the things in it (2015: 585). Echoing these arguments, while performing chants and uttering sounds, shamans in the ethnographic context of Tuva, rather than mirroring a particular cosmic landscape and its acoustic features, are, in fact, actualising the presence of particular spirits and thus creating sociocosmic configurations afresh. In this way, the spirits are made 'ritually present' (Severi 2014: 59) through the means of the shaman's voice. In order to illustrate this argument further, I draw on Severi's concept of transmutation (2014) and Brabec de Mori's discussion of the materialisation of spirits through sounds (2015).

In his discussion on transmutating beings (2014), Carlos Severi analyses the concept of transmutation as a cultural form of translation that involves the exploration of a set of multiple relations between different forms of cognition. Thus, Severi expands the definition of translation from linguistics to other forms of translation, such

as the intersemiotic transmutation (ibid.: 41). This process is based, as Severi explains, on synesthetic fusion, which implies that what is seen can be constantly translated into what is heard and vice versa (ibid.: 47). In this way, through music, an acoustic image is generated which in turn ‘produces indexical presence where musical ways are being mobilized in order to define complex non-human beings’ (ibid.: 59). In short, as Severi argues, particular ways of singing produce a certain melodic contour or motif, which in turn indicates an image that stands for a certain spirit acting in the current situation (ibid.). Most importantly, as Severi delineates further, ‘transmutation is not limited to the description of the appearance of the beings it represents’ (ibid.: 59). Instead, ‘music and visual iconographies aim to construct images of concepts and relationships, rather than imitations of appearances’ (ibid.). As the shaman addresses the ‘invisible’ spirit through music, the relationship between the musical motif and the being is strengthened and, rather than imitating the spirit, it becomes the spirit. As a result, the music constitutes the only index of the spirit’s presence (ibid.: 57).

In this way, Severi shows how a particular kind of ontology can be actualised by the musical ways in order to ‘define complex non-human beings’ (ibid.: 59). While drawing on Severi’s arguments, Brabec de Mori in his work on the Peruvian Amazon healers (2015) discusses how spirits are materialised through the means of the shaman’s voice. He shows how the quality of the singer’s voice can take on the agency allowing to identify the ‘sonic being’ present in the ritual (ibid.: 35). In this way, the spirits’ physicality becomes substantiated through the singer’s voice, meaning that the voice of the shaman constitutes the spirit’s body (ibid.).

As illustrated in the opening vignette involving Ajdyn, during the ritual the shaman produces a variety of sounds that punctuate her negotiations with the spirits as well as the spirits’ presence in the room. In the first part of the ritual, the audience is confronted with a matrix of sudden screams alternated with nasty roars of laughter and followed by humming and abrupt shouts, ‘*hyshhh, hyshhh*’, which Tuvans often use when trying to get rid of or calm down an angry dog. The shaman, while generating these sounds, is not visible to the audience, which consequently disturbs the immediate association of the uttered sounds with the figure of the shaman. Indeed, when Ajdyn talked about the ritual, he focused on the voice and the sounds that allowed the spirits to become present in the room, rather than on the shaman’s persona herself. This was



further strengthened by his numerous reactions. As he emphasised, the shaman performed well and, therefore, he was able to catch a glimpse of the spirit. He knew the spirit responsible for his curse was in the room which made him grab the knife and remain vigilant. In this way, the client and his family were exposed to a sonic duel, where the spirit was actualised through the combination of particular sounds rather than was sonically represented or imitated through the shaman's voice. Consequently, Hovalygmaa's voice instantiated a kind of agency that allowed her to voice into existence concrete beings and thus establish 'performative ontological linkages between humans and non-humans' (ibid. 25). The screams, howls and humming produced by the shaman marked the indexical presence of the spirits and, combined with alternations in the shaman's voice such as changes in intonation and rhythm, punctuated the proceedings of the negotiations between the spirit responsible for inflicting the curse and the shaman. In this way, drawing on Brabec de Mori and Severi, what the European tradition knows as 'music' or random sounds could be considered, in the ethnographic context of Tuva, as the foundation or a precisely crafted act of communication, primarily addressed to non-human beings (Brabec de Mori 2014: 37, Severi 2014: 59).

Nevertheless, this communication has to be carried out in particular ways in order to achieve desired results, such as the infliction of curse or its removal. Sounds and differences in their articulation produce numerous implications and effects for the interactions between spirits and shamans as well as shamans and clients, which, in turn, not only influence the efficacy of the shamans' work but also contribute to their reputation within the community.

## **2.2. Relations of efficacy and spirits**

An example of the importance of accurate performance as a means of achieving particular effects, such as alleviation of suffering, is provided by Piedade from his work among the Wauja of the Upper Xingu in Brazil (2013). As he explains, 'a sacred flute performance involves an effort to achieve perfection in execution of the musical motifs and in the development of the form in order to guarantee the beauty and acuity needed to maintain cosmic balance' (ibid.: 317). Similarly, among the Yaminahua

shamans, shamanic songs do not have invariant narrative (although some of them, mainly songs constructed from myths, may have a fixed combination of metaphors and images) (Townesley 1993: 458). Performance of a song is in fact contingent on the shaman's skill, their visionary experience and intentions. Moreover, songs are not perceived as an individual project and are said to be partially created by the Yoshi spirit, who gives or shows the songs to the shamans (ibid.). Consequently, songs are meant to produce concrete visionary experiences in the shamans themselves and facilitate communication with spirits, which is an integral part of this visionary experience. In this way, in contrast to Levi-Strauss's argument, songs are not produced in order to change, through analogy, the consciousness of the client and thus cure, but to produce particular visions (ibid.: 459). Consequently, the song constitutes a path that navigates and develops the shaman's vision and from the perspective of the shaman it does not matter whether the clients can understand what the song is about or not (ibid.: 460).

Echoing Piedade and Townesley, in Tuva the ability to produce sounds in a particular way imbues the shamans with power, which allows them to both conjure the spirits and simultaneously maintain a necessary distance. Thus, they stabilise the unsettlement created by the drum through (re)arranging a cosmic setting within which humans and non-humans can 'coexist at acceptable levels of ambiguity' (Taylor 1996: 207). In this process, the shaman's voice and its accurate modulation are essential for the efficacy of the shamanic work, both in relation to spirits as well as to the clients and the audience. Consequently, in order to remove or inflict curses the shaman has to properly generate a variety of sounds, such as screams or humming, to make the spirits (responsible for curses) either leave the victims or attack them. Moreover, there are particular sounds, such as howls or high pitched short screams, that irritate the spirits as well as tease them. In short, the spirits respond to sounds while the voice of the shaman calms them down or makes them angrier. During negotiations, the shamans often ask gods and other spirits for help. As a result, the shaman modulates her voice in the way the spirits are expecting, for instance she either sings softly and in a more beautiful way in order to please the spirits or sings more strongly and in lower tones when seeking to force spirits to do something. As Hovalygymaa explained it, she is told by the spirits how to sing in order to successfully remove or inflict the curse. The spirits

are demanding a particular melody, intonation and specific modulation of the voice, which, in a similar way to Yaminahua shamanism, makes them the partial owners of the songs performed during the ritual. As I was told on many occasions, if the music is not well-performed the spirit may attack. Inaccurate performance may lead to death or illness for the shaman. Sloppy performance or a too short one can further aggravate the spirits. In this way, the shaman has to learn to apprehend the sounds of words and sounds in general, much like the musicians learn to apprehend the sounds of music (Stoller 1984).

### **2.3. Relations of efficacy and the client**

Different ways of singing and producing sounds have implications not only for the interactions with spirits, but also for the interactions between the shaman and the client as well as any audience present. The audience is often composed of the close family of the victim, curious neighbours and, occasionally, extended family members.

As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, the sounds produced by the shaman actualise the presence of the spirits and navigate vivid negotiations with the spirit responsible for inflicting curses. This sonic presence is apprehended not only by the shaman but also by the client, who responds to changes in the registers of the shaman's voice through moving, making a particular facial expression or changing posture, actively participating in the process of (re)shuffling sociocosmic interactions. During Ajdyn's ritual, the dramaturgy of negotiations with the spirit was substantiated through the shaman's voice with rapid alternations of screams and nasty laughter combined with humming. This triggered a variety of reactions in the audience, ranging from sudden jumps and the instances of Ajdyn grabbing the knife to discreet dancing, as performed by one of his sons. In this way, the contour, the shape of the relationship between the shaman, the spirit and the client was available to everyone. Through attentive listening, the client became an active participant in the dramatic occurrences of the ritual, which in turn guaranteed the success of the ritual. The audience's responses did not constitute symbolic gestures, but rather were spontaneous (re)actions generated by particular auditory manifestations. Indeed, it can be argued that what renders the ritual memorable and generates attention from the client and the audience

is precisely its instability. In other words, the relationship between the client, the spirits and the shaman is alive and intense leading to sounded eruptions which somehow stimulate people and cause their reactions. These reactions are achieved not through the means of objects or words, but through the means of sounds and attentive listening. In summation, echoing Taussig's critique of Levi-Strauss (1992), I suggest, that in order to grasp the essence of the ritual proceedings, one should engage with the ritual's conflictual characteristics, rather than 'seek to disavow its elements through shrugging them off or straightening them out through "structuralism" machinery' (ibid.: 48, original emphasis).

In so doing, I do not argue that the sounds produced by the shaman during the ritual constitute an intrinsically chaotic or coincidental matrix of aural elements. Conversely, referring back to Severi's argument, sounds generated by the shamanic voice allow a certain 'sonorous configuration' (Severi 2015: 249) to emerge. During Ajdyn's ritual, the client was confronted with alternations between soft howling and loud screams, intertwined with the chanting, where each passage was finished with a long cry, 'ohoooo'. In this way, the shaman's voice produces a schema of alternation with some degree of perceptible sonorous regularity which orients the client's listening, regardless of whether any precise meaning is associated with it (ibid.). This neatly dovetails with the shamans' claim that the ritual may only succeed if the client is listening 'properly' (*taptyg*). As a result, to draw on Severi, 'from the listener's point of view, the shaman provides a kind of *sonorous carpet* (...) organised according to a minimal degree of order that is established by the musical chant' (ibid., original emphasis) and other sounds without ever being contingent on their meaning.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the presence of the spirits, while actualised through the shaman's voice, often becomes physically experienced by the clients through different perceptual means, such as touch, hearing and sight. It is common among Tuvans to connect these experiences with the quality of the shaman's work, thus allowing the clients to contest the authenticity of the shaman's skills. Given this, the notions of sounds and the shaman's voice become intimately intertwined with the politics of legitimation, as it is only the 'real shamans' (*jozulug hamnar*) who can force the spirits to reveal themselves to the audience, if only partially.

### 3. The politics of legitimization

One day, Hovalygmaa and I were coming back from a clan ritual which took place in the middle of the taiga forest in the south of Tuva. The shaman worked really well and everyone was satisfied with the outcome of the ritual proceedings, which focused on providing the members of the clan with fertility and good fortune. We were travelling through the fields of grass squeezed at the back of a jeep. There was enough room for five people, but nonetheless we managed to fit eight of us inside. Despite a lack of travelling comforts everyone was in a joyful mood, sharing jokes and funny stories. At one point, one of the members of the clan looked at me and asked in a very serious voice if I believed in the presence of spirits during the ritual. The car suddenly filled with silence as everyone looked towards me. I explained carefully to my friends that I would prefer to leave these questions unanswered, however, I had deep respect for everything I witnessed. My response was met with overall approval followed, however, by the shaman's sarcastic comment that the only thing that people participating in the ritual are interested in is what the spirits look like.

I have often observed how the shamans would get particularly annoyed and even surprised by the clients' as well as the tourists' constant desire to physically meet with the spirits. As discussed in Chapter Three, the realm of the spirits is rarely available for scrutiny and it is not obvious whether they live in ways that mirror that of humans. Consequently, sudden confrontations with spirits, occurring sometimes in everyday practices or intense dreams, often trigger a lot of fear among Tuvans and require immediate intervention from shamans. Nevertheless, this seems to be quite different in the context of rituals, where the chance to see a spirit is both feared and desired while it also constitutes solid proof of the authenticity and efficacy of the shaman's skills. Indeed, Tuvans firmly maintain that the ability to bring 'spiritual' presence into direct physical experience is what strengthens the shaman's position within the community and confirms the efficacy of their work. It is very common among Tuvans to say that a 'good shaman' (*eki hamnar*) is the one that can 'show' (*körgyzer*) them something. On numerous occasions, I was told that the shaman 'sang

well' (*yrlaar eki*), and the clients saw a spirit on a horse or in a beautiful gown, heard spirits murmuring or felt a cold wind on their faces. In an interesting way, descriptions of an effective ritual converge with Siegel's analysis of the mechanics of witchcraft (2006) in Indonesia. In his discussion, Siegel reiterates Mauss's theory of the gift, which explains how the naming of the possession leads to domestication of the pure gift. In this way, saying what has been received indicates that it came from somewhere, 'the possibility of something having arrived that entirely exceeds recognition is denied' (ibid.: 8). Thus, naming the witch marks the accident and asserts that it has a source. As Siegel concludes; what happens 'for no reason and therefore proceeds from no place nameable is in this way possibly recovered for the social' (ibid.: 9).

Siegel's argument echoes, to a certain extent, the conditions upon which Tuvans assess the efficacy of the shaman's work. Sounds allow for the sharing of particular experiential knowledge about what cannot be seen or heard (*bürülbaazyn*) which, nonetheless, must be acknowledged somehow or otherwise, to echo Siegel, it might go unnoticed. In this way, sounds, rather than just a mere means to the ritual, become 'a foundation of experience and thus of knowledge' (Stoller 1984: 564). The process of voicing spirits into being and reshuffling the sociocosmological momentum of curse is expected to be recognised by the clients through different senses, such as smell, touch or hearing. In this way, drawing on Espirito Santo, 'ritually generated knowledge has ontological, rather than just epistemological, effects, independent of the role of cognition' (2015: 579).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have focused on the agentive role of sounds generated in rituals by the shamanic voice. Consequently, I have approached sounds as imbued with the potency to actualise the presence of spirits as well as navigate negotiations with them. In my analysis, I have argued that, rather than producing a particular soundscape, through singing shamanic chants the shamans voice into being a given fragment of the cosmos and engage in the process of (de)forming it. In short, I have shown how sounds

uttered by the shaman, while operating within turbulence triggered by the sounds of the drum, produce new cosmic configurations, for example curse deflection.

At the same time, the shamans are expected to allow the audience to physically experience the presence of spirits through their senses which is intimately intertwined with the politics of legitimation and general contestation of the shaman's work. Nevertheless, in order to experience physical confrontations with spirits, the client has to remain focused and listen attentively. In this way, through sounds the shamans share with the clients and their families a kind of knowledge that has not only epistemological but also ontological effects.

The issue of the efficacy of shamanic practice dovetails with questions of authenticity; questions that have become key in the context of post-Soviet Kyzyl and diverse socioeconomic and political transformations. The issue of being an 'authentic' shaman has generated a lot of tension within the shamanic landscape. The ways in which some shamans work today have been defined by my informants through the notions of conflicts, disturbance, and uncertainty, and thus a kind of uncontrolled turbulence I have described in the context of cursing. Similar descriptions have been employed in relation to other challenges and problems that have proliferated in the wake of Soviet disintegration, such as alcoholism or technological development. Some of them have been directly defined as curses. Given this, in the next chapter, while expanding the context of mechanics of cursing and reemphasising its presence in the arena of post-Soviet Kyzyl, I show how everyday existence in the city is talked about and experienced in a way that curses are described and felt. In this way, I shall suggest that life in Kyzyl today is like a curse.





## Chapter 6

### Beyond curses: in the midst of turbulent Kyzyl

#### Introduction

It was the beginning of May and the whole city was preparing for the Victory Day celebrations.<sup>31</sup> Every day, amidst the loud orders of the Russian military, the youth of Tuva practiced parading along the streets of Kyzyl while the local choir, composed mainly of Tuvan men, rehearsed Soviet songs on a small stage situated in the heart of the central square. One afternoon, I was returning home from my Tuvan language lessons and I decided to cross the square to see how the preparations were coming along. The first thing I noticed was the air filled with brown clouds while a swirling sandstorm was looming on the horizon. As the square began to be consumed by wind and grains of sand, I watched a group of maybe twelve-year-old girls practicing their dance routine on stage. They were singing a 2014 world hit, ‘Waka Waka’ (‘This Time for Africa’), a song performed by the famous Colombian pop star Shakira. In the midst of the approaching storm, they kept on imitating the singer’s moves from the video clip and following the music. I was struck deeply by this almost surreal scene: a group of young Tuvans practicing a Colombian pop star’s hit about Africa meant to commemorate the victory of the Soviet Union over the Nazis, performed in the middle of the steppe, in a sandstorm in Kyzyl, on the southern border of Siberia.

This short vignette illuminates in an explicit fashion the mosaic-like fabric of everyday life in Kyzyl, twenty-five years after the end of the Soviet regime. In the

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<sup>31</sup> Victory Day commemorates the Soviet Union victory over the Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

wake of Soviet disintegration, Tuvans were facing numerous economic, political and social challenges, similarly to other indigenous groups in Siberia (Grant 1995; Pedersen 2011; Humphrey & Sneath 1999). Living conditions in Tuva, especially at the beginning of the 90s, were characterised by pervasive unemployment as well as widespread crime and violence, in particular against Russians, which later on generated the unjustified belief that Kyzyl is one of the most criminal and violent parts of post-Soviet Siberia (Koperski 2011). Socioeconomic and cultural shifts in the post-Soviet Tuvan landscape included the institutionalisation of shamanic practice, the re-introduction of three official confessions (Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and Shamanism), rapid technological development, the freeing-up of commerce, spread of alcoholism as well as other diseases such as depression and HIV, and finally the proliferation of occult practices, all of which have had serious implications for patterns of being and living among Tuvans.

The variety of sociocultural, political and economic processes occurring in the wake of Soviet disintegration in Siberia and concerning the indigenous peoples have been analysed in a great amount of anthropological and ethnographic works (among others, see Grant 1995; Vitebsky 2003; Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Swancutt 2012). The focal point of these studies has been, on the one hand, the political and economic struggles of the indigene, associated with the introduction of private property and the emergence of the capitalist market, and, on the other hand, a variety of political projects striving at the reestablishment of local 'ethnic identities' (Shimamura 2004; Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Balzer 2002, 2005, 2008; Lindquist 2005, 2008). In most of these scholarly treatments, post-colonial dynamics have been predominantly grasped through the intertwining of 'the old' with 'the new' or 'tradition' with 'modernity'. In the ethnographic context of Tuva, however, the use of such terms in the study of post-colonial processes, remains problematic. As one of my closest informants put it, life in Kyzyl today resembles the form of a battlefield. 'People and things function while constantly clashing and disturbing one another, which creates a lot of anxiety and uncertainty', he explained. Another one of my informants, while sharing similar views, emphasised the idea of technological development, stressing how rapid or abrupt change creates an experience of shock similar to experiences of being cursed. More

than that, many of my informants directly described numerous issues, such as the spread of alcoholism and other diseases in post-Soviet times, as instances of cursing.

Drawing on these descriptions, in this chapter I suggest that processes occurring in post-Soviet Kyzyl are perceived and experienced by my friends and informants in a similar fashion to the experiences of curses. In other words, I suggest that what happens in Kyzyl today is like a curse. In my analysis, I follow Bubandt's argument that witchcraft and certain world risks, such as terrorism, although embedded in a different epistemological logic, experientially may exist and function in a form of symbiosis (2014: 241). Thus, I seek to show how the implications of Soviet disintegration can be brought together while sharing elements of disturbance, uncertainty and shock and, thus, resembling the kind of uncontrolled turbulence I have described in relation to the experience of curses. I simultaneously hope to provide a counterargument to anthropological treatments seeking to conceptualise processes in post-Soviet Siberia through the categories of ethnic and cultural revivalism, which tend to overlook far too many implications of the tensions characteristic of the post-Soviet world. More than that, I suggest that emphasising the mechanics of cursing allows us to emancipate occult phenomena from the rigid dichotomies of 'the old' and 'the new' and turn them into effective methodological tools with which we can ask questions and explore the mosaic-like characteristics of the sociocultural contexts in which occultism is inherently embedded.

In order to delineate my argument, this chapter is split into three sections. In the first part, I foreground my analysis through exploring a number of different processes occurring in Kyzyl twenty years after the Soviet dissolution. In particular, I focus on the complex dynamics between shamanic societies and independent shamans, modes of cooperation and disintegration within the 'religious' sphere, shifts in family structure and their intertwining with the spread of alcoholism and other diseases, and, finally, the implications of technological developments. In short, I show how these processes are seen in a similar way to curses, emphasising the elements of conflict, disturbance, shock and uncertainty. In the second section, through providing a brief historical description of the notion of indigeneity in Siberia, I flesh out particular sociocultural tensions between Russians and Tuvans and demonstrate how these tensions contribute further to the perceptions of life in Kyzyl as deeply uncertain and

disturbing. Concluding my analysis, in the third section I propose using the mechanics of cursing as an efficient methodological tool with which we can better understand the challenges that occur in post-Soviet Kyzyl. In doing so, I briefly engage with the frameworks of ‘cultural revivalism’ and ‘invention of tradition’ and show how, in the context of Tuva, they remain problematic.

## **1. Post-Soviet Kyzyl**

As discussed throughout this thesis, instances of cursing arise from conflicts amongst humans and reflect wider tensions, which include humans and spirits alike, while producing a distinct sociocosmic drama. Being cursed is described as a form of intrusion, when spirits responsible for curse infliction disturb the victims and ‘mess’ with them. This, in turn, generates the experience of shock and turbulence exemplified in confusion, as well as erratic and unpredictable behaviour. The same ideas of conflict, disturbance, shock, and uncertainty used to describe these experiences have been employed by my friends and informants to talk about some of the problems and challenges faced by Kyzylis in the wake of Soviet disintegration. A number of these problems and challenges have been directly defined as curses. In order to more fully grasp this symbiosis between the phenomenon of curse and life in the post-Soviet capital, as spoken about and felt by my interlocutors, it is essential to reemphasise the difference between existence in Soviet and post-Soviet times.

Inevitably, as stressed by my informants, the process of Sovietisation radically changed the lives of many Tuvans, providing a rich soil for the exacerbation of diverse challenges and tensions. Nevertheless, it was a period of time where things were more or less controlled by the state, whilst any conflict amongst people was subdued. Shamanic practices as well as interactions with spirits were conducted in deep secrecy and occurred extremely rarely. More than that, my informants were provided with a job, a place to live and some food which imbued them with a sense of security offered by the state. After the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union, this situation has radically changed, resulting in a familiar post-Soviet scenario discussed in many other contexts in Siberia (see, for example, Pedersen 2011; Humphrey 2002; Grant 1995; Anderson 2000; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). Life suddenly became erratic and unpredictable, with

escalating unemployment and poverty leading to increases in violence, crime and alcoholism. Within this context, thus far dormant tensions were revealed and intensified, resulting in the proliferation of cursing (Chapter One). These tensions pertained not only to humans, but also spirits who, according to the shamans I have worked with, were equally aggravated and often suffering from the similar instances of alcoholism and violence as well as neglect. Twenty years later, as my friends and informants often stressed, life in Kyzyl still remains unpredictable and uncertain as people struggle with the continuous threat of losing jobs, suffering from diseases and being cursed. Diverse processes taking place in the city, such as the work of shamans from shamanic societies or spread of alcoholism, are not described as a direct consequence of the end of the Soviet regime. Rather, echoing Pedersen's argument about the proliferation of half-shamans and shamanism as a fashion in which life in Norther Mongolia re-situated itself after the end of the Soviet Union (2011: 41), these processes are spoken about and felt in the same way as instances of cursing.

In the next section, I illustrate this argument through focusing on tensions and conflicts amongst shamanic and other 'religious' practitioners. Following this, I discuss the problem of alcoholism, diseases, and the process of technological development. Thus, I show how living in Kyzyl is, to some extent, like experiencing a curse.

### **1.1. Shamanic societies and independent shamans**

I shall begin my discussion by exploring the complex landscape of shamanic practice in the city. Shortly after the end of the Soviet Union, shamanism, along with Russian Orthodoxy and Buddhism, was declared by the Republic of Tuva as a 'traditional confession' (Pimienova 2013: 129). This process was officially initiated by a group of Kyzyl'ian intellectuals, and was considered a key argument in their quest for the international recognition of local cultural heritage. The new status of shamans led to the further institutionalisation of shamanic practice in the form of shamanic societies, and quickly transformed shamanism into an intellectual virtue and a vibrant subject of academic and political debates (Pimienova 2013, Zorbas 2013, Stepanoff 2004). Over time, shamanic societies have become a stable source of income in a

difficult economic environment, and have begun to constitute an easily accessible reflection of the 'exotic' past, cherished by tourists but resented by Tuvans. Today, over twenty years after the end of the Soviet Union, shamanic practice in Kyzyl represents a scene of a complex tensions with a few remaining shamanic societies, a discreet network of individual shamans, and a rich group of all sorts of practitioners offering a variety of practices, including for example divination, curse infliction, and job security rituals. Consequently, the efficacy of the shamans' work in the capital is deeply permeated by possible falsity and doubt. In short, when Kyzylians like my informants engage in discussions about shamans, they concentrate almost exclusively on whether the practitioners are authentic or quacks, which, as they say, creates particular disturbances within the landscape of shamanic practice in general.

After the end of the Soviet regime, there were eight shamanic societies in Tuva. These organizations were run by Mongush Borakhovich Kenin-Lopsan, the President for Life of all shamans and an academically trained and highly respected Tuvan expert on shamanism (Levin 2006: 175). The group of societies brought together shamans from all over Tuva. Despite having concrete political aims, from the perspective of my informants the establishment of the societies primarily had pragmatic implications. This is how one of the shamans who, at the time, supported Kenin-Lopsan described this process to me:

Creating societies was a political move. Kenin-Lopsan and I fought a lot. In Soviet times the shamans practiced in secrecy. We knew who had a real gift and who was a charlatan. After the nineties youngsters would come with us, follow us, study. You can't learn shamanism from the book, that neo-shamanism, that's silly. You know, at the end of the Soviet Union there was complete chaos, alcoholism, crime and poverty here. People needed help and they had to be reminded of our traditions. Do you know why Kenin-Lopsan named himself a president? Because 'president', that means something, it is a powerful word.

Indeed, as presented in many stories from that time, disease, unemployment and a persistent lack of food had a significant influence on living conditions in Kyzyl. According to my informants, even the police encouraged people to look for support from shamans. As a result, the capital transformed into a place where shamans' help was consistently required. Not long after, other 'religious' organisations, in particular

the Orthodox Church, became suspicious about what they described as ‘illegal medicine’ offered by shamans trying to evade taxation. Consequently, a practical need for official recognition of the shamanic societies was expressed and, in this way, eight shamanic societies were established in Kyzyl.

The process of becoming a member of a society included lengthy training and usually was finalised with a test based on a practical examination in healing (Pimienova 2013; Levin 2006). In this form, the members of a given society were assessing the prospective shaman’s real powers and skills. Each new shaman would specialise in only one practice – for instance, divination with cards or treatment of headaches. Very often, the tests were performed on Kenin-Lopsan himself (Levin 2006: 174-176). The future shamans were asked to, for example, diagnose the President’s causes of high blood pressure or persistent headaches. In other cases, they were told to conduct divination rituals, including readings of the future and past of the President. Some of these tests resulted in suddenly discovered secrets with content which, with time, would become a subject of many humorous anecdotes circulating around Kyzyl. After the exam concluded, Kenin-Lopsan would decide whether the student passed and could become a shaman.<sup>32</sup> After that, the newly appointed shaman would receive a certificate, which stated what practices and treatments he or she could specialise in (*ibid.*). More than that, the shamans would obtain a red card confirming their connections with the society, a card similar to those stating membership of the Communist Party during the Soviet regime (*ibid.*). With time, shamanic societies, officially recognised as religious organisations, began to receive financial support from the government, as well as other forms of support becoming available for the shamans, such as assistance in obtaining a house lease or tax exemptions (VAT, income tax, property taxes) as well as means of transport (cars to visit the clients in rural areas) (Pimienova 2013: 127-129). The associated shamans were further guaranteed a minimum wage and would obtain regular salaries (*ibid.*). As time passed, the links between the state and the shamanic societies weakened and soon enough they were forced to become self-sufficient. In addition to this, many shamans decided to leave the societies, which had started demanding a high percentage of their income in exchange for affiliation and access to clients. Soon enough, those who decided to

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<sup>32</sup> On rare occasions, if the student failed, they would usually repeat their training.

remain began to be accused of quackery and greediness focusing on personal benefit. Consequently, Kyzylians started to be highly suspicious of the shamans working for the societies, and the relationships with them was characterised by fears of deep frustration and uncertainty. As one of my informants put it, affiliated shamans have been offering ‘shamanshows’ (Rus. *shamanshow*) while seeking to keep clients by telling them lies, for instance convincing them that the client suffered from curses. ‘This creates a lot of disturbance for people who no longer know whether they can or should trust shamans’, she explained. Indeed, in the wake of Soviet disintegration, the initial concentration and ‘resurgence’ of shamanic practitioners in the capital transformed with time into an unexpected disruption. Like the sudden appearance of ‘half-shamans’ in Northern Mongolia, understood as an abrupt, uncontrollable release of occult forces along with other chaotic processes developing in post-Soviet realm (Pedersen 2011: 5-9), the development of shamanic societies and proliferation of ‘fake’ (*shyn eves hamnar*) shamans in Kyzyl has created within the scene of shamanic practice conflicts and divisions. This, in turn, has perpetuated the feelings of uncertainty and doubt among Kyzylians. Fifteen years later, there are only three societies in Tuva which continue to offer services. *Dungur* (‘Drum’), the oldest one, is situated in the centre of Kyzyl, whilst *Tos Deer* (‘Nine skies’) and *Adyg-Eeren* (‘Bear spirit’) are on the outskirts of the city. The process of becoming a member of a society no longer requires tests and trainings. Instead, it relies simply on verbal confirmation of the future shaman’s skills, which only increases the feelings of overall uncertainty concerning shamanic practice.

When I first arrived in Kyzyl, my main aim was to visit one of these shamanic societies. Much to my surprise, numerous requests for any kind of access or help were met with general resentment and a consistent refusal on the grounds of general distrust towards associated with the societies shamans. In the end, one of the lecturers from the University of Kyzyl agreed to take me on a brief trip to one of the societies. Nevertheless, she was not sure where it was and we were forced to spend a couple of hours wandering around the streets looking for what I expected to at least be a small villa. We finally arrived at a small wooden house with a big sign indicating that we had reached our destination (see Figure 11).

As we entered a small waiting room, there was no trace of a lavish reception



desk or the extravagant furniture and decorations I had been told were common in the past. We were asked to go into another room where the chairman of a spiritual religious organisation, as her business card stated, was occupied with her mobile phone and a little girl running around her legs. She did not look at us and we had to wait for a while before she finally greeted us. My friend provided a long introduction, describing who I was and why I was in Tuva. The woman asked me about my date of birth and who my parents were. She defined my 'aura', gave me her business card and warned me to be vigilant of the shamans' tricky behavior. We thanked her profusely and moved back to the living room, where I noticed a thorough price list, including divination, healing, and cleansing rituals, as well as a little cash box guarded by three women sitting around a small table. I was allowed to have a look into a third room where three shamans dressed in fur coats sat at their tables awaiting their clients. The room revealed quite an unusual setting. One of the shamans was blind and kept wobbling. A woman opposite him was wearing sunglasses and had a number of stones in front of her, indicating she was a specialist in reading the future. The man in the back was occupied with carving his shamanic instruments and quietly laughing. The shamans were not willing to speak to me, but gave me their business cards, asking me to phone them in



order to make an appointment. We thanked them and moved towards the exit. No one looked at us. My friend asked me if I had seen enough and delicately implied she would not be willing to return.

**Figure 11:** Dungur- the shamanic society.

After this experience, I decided to find out what Kyzylilians think about the societies. Apart from the widespread suspicion of greediness, my informants were particularly discouraged by the shamans' tendency to exhibit unusual moves, such as a sudden loss of consciousness or rolling eyes, thus reinforcing the idea of 'shamanshow'. As they explained it, such behaviour only triggered anxiety and confusion. Independent shamans were often bewildered by the level of absurdity these performances could reach, as well as the overall focus on a need to impress tourists and make money above all else. For instance, Hovalygmaa vividly described to me how a certain shaman, while conducting an outdoor ritual for some visitors from Western Europe, tripped and fell on the ground. He did not want to look unprofessional so he started pretending he had fallen into a trance. No one, apart from Hovalygmaa, knew that he was simply tricking the whole audience. As she explained to me, such incidents constituted a cause of direct conflicts between independent shamans and shamans affiliated with the societies. Another aspect of shamanic societies that was particularly disturbing to my informants was the fact that there was a fixed price list for each ritual; 'Good shamans never advertise themselves and they will never tell you how much money you have to pay', I was told by one of Hovalygmaa's clients. Many of my interlocutors complained about a lack of privacy too; 'There are four tables and four shamans in one room, there is no intimacy, no possibility to talk about what is important', explained Marina, a Buryat who worked at the state university. She admitted that she would visit the societies out of curiosity; 'I went just to see what it was like. They sent me to my shamans in Buryatia and rushed me out, it was not pleasant and left me really confused and anxious'. Another woman, Olga, who runs a small tour guide business for tourists from Europe and North America in Kyzyl, described to me why she was unwilling to take her customers to the societies:

You have no idea what you can expect from them. They demand insane amounts of money like ten thousand rubles for a show (approximately one hundred pounds, the highest price for the most complicated death ritual). They are rude and greedy. I have three reliable shamans to whom I always go with our clients. They can tell you something real about

shamanism, not this commercial stuff. Otherwise, you can never tell if what they say is true. Very often they just invent all sorts of curses and rituals in order to make sure that you are going to come back and they can make more money. There is a lot of uncertainty when it comes to their work.

Interestingly, as Hovalygmaa admitted herself, the shamans in Kyzyl enjoy the fame they have received since the 90s. 'All researchers and tourists want to meet us and shamans sometimes take advantage of it. If we do not like someone we would just make up stories, tell you things that are entirely not true and then laugh at you behind your back. How are you going to tell what is real or not?', she smiled at me 'Be careful, shamans often say things out of tiredness or boredom, sometimes fear', Alexandr, a local musician, warned me. 'These days they are well educated and familiar with multiple academic texts on shamanism rather than learning from their ancestors or other shamans. They come up with their own theories on what shamanism is and what they are actually doing. They are messing with people and we do not trust them'.

As mentioned earlier, the shamanic societies no longer conduct any tests in order to verify the authenticity of shamanic powers. Affiliation with a society is often based on a verbal assertion that a person has some shamanic skills. Consequently, shamanic practice on many occasions becomes a last resort for desperate Tuvans who find themselves in serious economic and financial situations and approach shamanic societies as a possible source of employment. I had an opportunity to discuss this process with one of the local journalists who studied numerous cases of homeless people taken in by the societies. 'They come in and say somebody in the family was a shaman, they have a calling or they have dreams. In exchange, they get one meal a day and a place to sleep. They do not have to wander around in winter. I know this because I interview them all the time', she explained. In a similar fashion, some people become self-declared shamans simply to make a living. My landlady never really liked shamans and was highly suspicious of their practices. One day she sat down with me and asked why I wanted to know so much about shamanism. She told me I should drop my research and focus on something that was not an illusion and a lie. This is how she justified her suggestion:

You know these days anyone can become a shaman. Let me tell you a story. I have a friend

who is shamanising. Once, I sat down with her and said: 'Masha, tell me honestly, can you see things'? And Masha told me the truth: 'Honestly, Arzaana, I am no shaman. But what am I going to do? My husband left me, I lost my job and I have kids to feed. This is a sure thing these days, I really need the money'.

As I was told by many of my friends in Kyzyl, such declarations stand in direct conflict with what shamanic practice means to Tuvans and only perpetuate already well-established feelings of uncertainty and distrust associated with shamanic societies.

As discussed throughout this thesis, shamanic practice in Tuva is perceived as a form of artistry embedded in the creative navigation of sociocosmic interactions through the means of sound production. Usually performed in a private setting, these rituals have little to do with spectacular shows. Conversely, shamans from the societies put particular stress on the performative and technical effectiveness of the shaman's work, including spectacular instances of trance and mediumship that have little to do with the usual conceptualisations of shamanic practice as artistry. The implementation of the 'show' elements becomes clear when analysed through Benjamin's argument about art and mechanical reproduction (1992). Benjamin shows how 'mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual' (ibid.: 218) and how, in this way, the work of art becomes designed for reproducibility. Consequently, it begins to be based on another practice – politics (ibid.). In other words, the ultimate desire for reproducibility is associated with the masses' needs to bring things 'closer spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction' (ibid.: 217). The shifts in the characteristics of shamanic practice, in particular the new political and business-oriented agendas advertised by shamanic societies resonate with Benjamin's remarks and vividly illustrate the process by which the economic situation in Kyzyl emancipated shamanic practice from its contingency on creative interactions with spirits embedded in the efficacy of sounds. Through a strong emphasis on its exhibition value, shamanism offered by societies has become commodified and thus 'designed for reproducibility' (ibid.: 218) whilst disturbing my informants' understanding of what shamanic practice is or should be about.

In opposition to this, a network of individually operating shamans was established. These shamans did not advertise their work and they could only be found

through trusted friends or neighbours. They would also stress their independence from shamanic societies, describing the relationship with them as tense and conflictual. More than that, Kyzylis have developed a system of tests which would allow them to confirm the shaman's powers, the system upon which the independent shamans' reputation depended. Thus, as a result, a strong division between real (*shyn*) and fake (*shyn eves*) shamans was established. I provide a few examples of such tests in order to show how they contribute to the atmosphere of uncertainty that surrounds shamanic practice as described by informants.

Information about independent shamans is carefully kept away from strangers and shared through the means of *sarafanowoje radio*, that is 'Chinese Whispers'. In short, news about reliable shamans is discreetly spread in the corridors at different work places, between neighbours, or between family and friends. Pieces of information are carefully given away, always in a lowered tone of voice and preferably in an isolated spot or through short, partially encrypted text messages. Individual shamans work and live as if in the background of the city and do not particularly enjoy socialising. Unlike shamans from the societies, this is the first indicator that the shaman is not an impostor.

Money is another factor playing a key role in the assessment of the shaman's authentic powers and good intentions. As discussed earlier, the role of the shaman includes the perpetual navigation of fluctuating energies which generate and fuel sociocosmic interactions between humans and spirits. This process involves constant elements of reciprocity, and shamans are always expected to receive something, usually financial remuneration, for their work. Nonetheless, a real shaman will never ask for a specific amount of money. On a number of occasions, in particular involving foreign clients, I witnessed how the shamans felt unease when directly confronted with questions about how much money they would like to receive or if a given amount was enough. They tended to turn their heads or walk away without providing any answers, leaving irritated clients behind them. As it was explained to me, the financial offering depends on the amount of time spent on a consultation as well as the gravity of the problem discussed and the client's financial situation.

Apart from relative social isolation and the absence of a fixed price list,

independent shamans are often characterised by their already well-established reputation and usually, if they successfully helped a member of the family or a friend, their support will be recommended further. Nonetheless, it is common to continuously subject shamans to additional tests in order to not only reconfirm their powers, but also verify how efficient and effective they are.

Some of these methods involve testing the shaman's visionary skills through checking if shamans can see through objects and read people's minds. In these cases, clients often tease shamans by asking them for instance, to describe how many people are sitting behind the walls of the given building. One of the most popular tests involves demanding the shaman to say something that is intimately related to the client's life and that, apart from them, only the dead could know. Given the deep fear of the dead held by many Tuvans, correct answers usually constitute very powerful confirmations of shamanic skills, and guarantee further recommendations. Moreover, it is very common to conduct a wider comparison of the efficacy of the shamans' work through a diagnostic test. In these cases, one client decides to visit a number of shamans with the exact same question. Afterwards, the answers are compared. Their consistent overlapping constitutes a good indication of authentic shamanic skills. Interestingly, the shamans themselves admit that they have to undergo one of the most significant tests; the overcoming of their own ego. Consequently, if the shaman becomes engrossed by fame and a desire to increase financial income, then within the groups of independent shamans they are disregarded and often ostracised.

Openly displaying financial profit and striving towards fame and recognition trigger tensions and disagreements between individual shamans and shamans affiliated with societies. During my fieldwork I worked with three independent shamans, who decided to quit shamanic organisations due to conflicts over how much money they should give back to the society. As Hovalygmaa told me, such demands constituted a direct disturbance to what her work was about and she could not fully concentrate on conducting rituals. Shaman Sajana, who moved out to the countryside, openly condemned shamans from the organisations while emphasising a direct conflict between what they did with what real shamanic practice is about.

Thus, discrepancies within the shamanic landscape in post-Soviet Kyzyl are characterised by tensions between independent shamans and shamans affiliated with

shamanic societies. The distrust displayed by Tuvans towards the more business-oriented practices provided by the shamanic societies also results in a broader distrust towards shamanic work, including independent shamanic practice, as a whole. Furthermore, the ‘unauthentic’ exercise of shamanic rituals conducted by the societies equally distorts and disturbs perceptions of how shamans should normally operate. Taken together, this has instantiated a lot of uncertainty among my informants as to whom they can trust and who can efficiently resolve their problems. Nevertheless, in post-Soviet Kyzyl such conflicts do not pertain only to the shamanic landscape. In the wake of Soviet disintegration, there has been a lot of tensions between representatives of the Orthodox Church and other ‘religious’ practitioners, including shamans.

## **1.2. The religious landscape**

Before the Soviets, shamanic practices in Tuva were limited to the closest neighbors and relatives and only on rare occasions were shamans chosen to lead collective rituals such as *ovaa* or *tagylga* – the ceremonies worshipping the land spirits (Pimenova 2013: 122). Shamanism was used in healing and fortune telling, propitiation of the forest spirits before hunting, and funerary rituals. Tuvan shamans lived lives similar to any other ordinary member of a community, though they rarely interacted with other shamans (ibid.). The eighteenth century, with the invasion of the Manchurian-Chinese Empire brought Buddhism to Tuva, the formation of the Buddhist clergy and the recognition of Buddhism as the state religion (ibid.). Until the early 1930s the Russians did not interfere in the sphere of religious beliefs in Tuva. Only then did they initiate antireligious policy and systematic religious persecution. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government introduced three official confessions in Tuva. As much as shamans and lamas have maintained a form of cooperation in the process of working with people, representatives of the Orthodox Church have remained outside this symbiosis while openly and incessantly striving to convert Kyzylians.

Orthodox Christianity was introduced in Tuva in the nineteenth century and has remained related with the Russian minority (Pimienova 2013: 129). As

Hovalygmaa explained it, rather than seeking different forms of cooperation with other religions in Tuva (like, for instance, Buddhism), the representatives of the Orthodox Church always looked for ways to impose their own spiritual viewpoints and openly refused to acknowledge the relevance of shamanic practice. During my fieldwork in Kyzyl I lived right next to one of the Orthodox churches, whose shining dome distinguished itself vividly from the rest of the city landscape. The area was rather deserted and when I tried to visit the church on a number of occasions it always remained locked. One day, when I was observing the yard near the block where I stayed, I noticed an orthodox priest who, in scorching heat, wandered around the yard and tried to talk to a few men standing outside one of the blocks smoking. Much to my surprise, they refused to listen to him and waved their hands while asking him to walk away. The priest was adamant in his efforts and tried to access the staircase while the men continued to stop him. This procedure was repeated a number of times and on a number of different days.

While I shared the story with Hovalygmaa she emphasised that the Orthodox Church was the only religious community that disassociated itself from the rest of the religious landscape in Tuva and refused to acknowledge the importance of the interactions between spirits and humans inherent to Tuvan cosmology. Despite representing different religious worldviews, all of her friends and acquaintances, including Catholics and Muslims, would always respect the presence of Tuvan spirits. Many of my informants were in fact Buddhists, which did not prevent them from visiting the shamans on a regular basis. Very often, their flats were decorated with small statues of Buddha and images of the Dalai Lama that were never moved or hidden in the presence of a shaman and did not trigger any concern during the shamanic ceremonies. More than that, the outdoor clan rituals often included representatives of different religions, which did not impede them from participating in the ceremonies (Lindquist 2008). The only group which officially refused to recognise these aspects of life in Tuva was the Orthodox Church.

As a result, the presence of these practitioners was often described by my interlocutors as something annoying and disturbing that has to be brushed off and ignored. When I asked one of my informants how she would define the work of the Orthodox Church, she compared them to an army of soldiers. ‘They are like soldiers



or intruders who, at any cost, try to recruit people as if forming an army', she explained. Many of my informants repeated this metaphor, emphasising, in particular, the aspect of intrusion. This comparison is particularly interesting given the fact the Orthodox Church represents the religion of the old colonisers. Thus, taken together, the presence and activity of Orthodox Church constitutes, in the words of my informants, an enforced change to their ways of being, compared to a military interference. More than that, as illuminated by Hovalygmaa, there are tensions between the Orthodox Church and other practitioners stemming from a refusal of the former to recognise the fabric of the Tuvan world, in particular the presence of spirits.

Apart from the diverse conflicts within the shamanic and broader religious landscapes, one of the challenges which intensified after the Soviet dissolution is alcoholism and other diseases. My informants, in particular shamans described this issue as curses of civilization (Rus. *cyvilizacijonnaja porcha*). These included, apart from drinking problems, the spread of HIV and depression, associated primarily with damages to the structure of the family as well as the rapid technological development.

### **1.3. 'Curses of civilisation'**

The end of Sovietisation has significantly damaged (in comparison to pre-Soviet and Soviet times) the structure of Tuvan family and changed perceptions about the roles women and men should undertake while starting a family (Mongush 2006). I have already indicated the negative implications of single motherhood as well as the status of divorced women in post-Soviet Kyzyl (Chapter One), articulated through an implicit emphasis on the Russian and Christian models of family. In a similar fashion, there have been particular shifts in perceptions of the role of a man within the family due to spreading alcoholism. As briefly discussed in the Introduction, during the time of the Soviet Union, the ways of nomadic life and pastoral economies produced no surplus value which could be used by the Soviet Russian state as exportable commodities (Forsyth 1992: 290). This led to the process of collectivisation of hunting, fishing and herding activities and proletarianising them in collectives subordinated to the superstructure of the Soviet state (*ibid.*). The Soviet Russians advertised collectivisation as a path to a healthier mixed diet and constant supply of food. In

reality, it was about the organisation of the hunting and herding economy for higher productivity based on utilising the labor of ex-nomads in ‘socialist construction’ (Grant 1995: 158). The end of the Soviet regime, resulting in the introduction of private property and the free market, left many Kyzylsians unemployed. Consequently, it is now mostly women who have become providers within the family, with men often suffering from alcoholism, violence and suicides (Mongush 2006). These problems, prevailing in many other parts of post-Soviet Siberia (Grant 1995; Pedersen 2011), in Tuva have been described as a form of an epidemic which could not be controlled by state institutions and, thus, has become central to shamanic practice (Zorbas 2013: 95-97).

Ongoing increases in alcoholism was one of the most common issues mentioned by my informants in relation to problematic aspects of life in post-Soviet Kyzyl. They were directly categorised as curses whose presence significantly intensified in the wake of the Soviet dissolution. Before the Soviets, only male members of the community and those over forty would drink *araka*, vodka made out of sheep’s milk. Alcohol was introduced by the Soviets and slowly began to constitute a wider issue mainly concerning men. In Tuva, being tempted to drink and later on developing a drinking problem currently constitutes one of the most common curses one would inflict on, for instance, their ex-spouse. During numerous rituals I have participated in, alcohol was described to me as a force that overtakes people and which they cannot resist. I was usually provided with vivid descriptions of people who, while suffering from alcoholism, were in fact led by the spirits responsible for inflicting the curse. These spirits were said to encourage people to drink, creating an urge that was beyond one’s control. Usually, as I was told, the early onset of a drinking problem can be removed with the help of a shaman through the curse deflection ritual. Nevertheless, perpetually drunk and homeless Tuvans are rarely offered help as their condition is considered too advanced. Thus, they are a regular occurrence in the streets of Kyzyl while being resented by the rest of the community. Sometimes, they receive some support from the shamanic societies, but most of the time they are ostracised and left alone. For instance, my landlady would often express her discontent with alcoholics, calling them intruders who would enter the buildings at night and sleep in the staircases causing overall fear. In this way, alcoholism, while being directly perceived as a form

of curse, simultaneously creates additional conflicts and tensions, often compared to a form of disturbance, within the community.

Apart from alcoholism, there are other diseases, such as depression and HIV, which have been spreading after the end of the Soviet regime while being conceptualised as curses. Disoriented victims often seek help from the shamans. For instance, Hovalygmaa has had a few clients who, unaware of the implications and causes of HIV, visited her demanding curse deflection rituals. Interestingly though, the shaman refused to help while referring them back to medical doctors. Nevertheless, shamans, along with different government organisations including the university, have undertaken a variety of actions beyond curse deflection rituals in order to decrease instances of depression or alcoholism. For instance, one of the most celebrated holidays in Kyzyl is the father's day, which is not only meant to boost men's confidence and self-esteem but also to improve the overall image of the family as strong, stable and healthy. In support of this, some shamans proposed to begin to offer a bowl with tea and milk first to a man at the end of each purification ritual. As I had the opportunity to see for myself, this change became a permanent element of the ceremonies. All of these actions, in turn, are meant to prevent ongoing divorces and instances of adultery often associated with curses that lead to drinking problems, suicides and depression.

#### **1.4. Technological developments**

The end of the Soviet Union brought along technological development in Tuva, including the introduction of cell phones, the internet, and plans to construct a railway with fast moving trains. This, in turn, received a mixed understanding among my informants. Cell phones and the internet have been described, on the one hand, as disrupting phenomena, like curses, which numb the skills of living in the steppe and interacting with spirits, especially among the younger generations. On the other hand, they were also seen as facilitators of communication amongst humans. In contrast to this, the idea of fast moving trains, compared to the experience of being cursed, has been widely used in our discussions as an idiom of diverse uncertainties and challenges

associated with life after the collapse of the Soviet regime. I shall begin my discussion about these diverse technological shifts by focusing on social media and the use of cell phones.

One of the most striking daily rituals in Kyzyl is the process of choosing a mobile phone number. As I observed, in modern, colourful offices which stand out from the Soviet architecture, Kyzylisians would gather in large groups and, sometimes for hours, debate over the paper lists containing available mobile numbers. The choice of the number is usually associated with something that can be easily remembered or constitutes a significant number for a person, for instance a child's birthday or a date of marriage. People concurrently seem to visit these shops without any particular purpose, sometimes taking advantage of the sofas on which they would exchange news and gossip, completely ignoring the staff and queues.

Indeed, it appeared that life without a cell phone has become inconceivable among Tuvans. While emphasising this fact, some of my informants representing the older generations often complained about young Kyzylisians, who seemed anxious or fearful and have lost their ability to live in the steppe. As one of the university lecturers put it, the development of technological media 'cools' youths' interests in Tuvan ways of living, including long trips to the steppe or taiga. Thus, when confronted with such an endeavour, they feel lost and uncertain about how to survive. In particular, my friend was concerned about the online presence of advertisements as they are said to greatly influence people's desires and make them ignore the lives of the ancestors. As she explained, these kinds of representations are a form of disturbance that makes people forget about what should be important. One of the examples, brought up on numerous occasions during my interviews and illustrating this point, were wedding ceremonies. In the past, these rituals simply included the exchange of gifts, such as blocks of tea. Today, they constitute a spectacular show where the family of the bride is expected to receive the most expensive gifts. This process triggers a lot of anger among older generations of Tuvans, causing tensions within families and friends. More than that, the spread of technological media, in particular cell phones and the internet, is said to mute or mess with Tuvans intuitive skills, interfering with abilities to interact with the landscape and communicate with spirits. For instance, as one of my informants

explained it to me, people can no longer easily orient themselves in space and intuitively predict events, for example the arrival of unexpected guests.

On the other hand, cell phones and the internet constitute an integral element of communication in Tuva, and greatly facilitate the shamans' work; this allows for the wider establishment of a network of regular clients. The possibility to remain connected on a wider scale has become one of the indispensable elements of shamanic work, both among individual shamans and shamans from the societies, thus bringing together human and technological media, in particular social media, in an explicit fashion. On one occasion, I participated in an intense and difficult ritual conducted in the middle of the deep steppe. I sat in the isolated, small wooden hut where fifteen members of the clan were gathered awaiting the ritual. The shaman was trying to prolong the life of a very sick seventy-year-old man suffering from post-surgical inflammation.<sup>33</sup> The ritual had a number of dramatic twists and it was not until the very late evening that the shaman decided it was time to return to Kyzyl. When we got into the car, she pulled a smartphone out of her pocket. 'Fuck, there is no reception here and I spent a whole day without Facebook', she swore in Russian and looked at me, truly concerned. I burst out laughing and asked if she realised that she was a powerful shaman whose skills and strengths could traverse seas and mountains and who just admitted her dependency on social media and the internet. 'I am a shaman of the twenty first century', she explained with a smile, and we both laughed as the car slowly drove towards the distant capital.

Indeed, cell phones not only have become an essential tool, employed by Tuvans to discreetly share information about reliable shamans, but also are now utilised by shamans in order to allow their clients to contact them and set up appointments. Moreover, mobile phones constitute for the shamans a portable list of regular clients and allow them to more effectively organise their diary. Interestingly, it is common among shamans from the societies, although unheard of among individual

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<sup>33</sup> Life expectancy in Tuva is said to be rarely higher than sixty years old. Consequently, as my informants explained, the shamans do not undertake any ritual proceedings concerning people over that age. As they say, if one lives up to sixty years old it implies their life has been filled and should not be unnecessarily prolonged. Nevertheless, in cases of family members and close friends the shamans might make exceptions.

shamans, to provide prospective clients with business cards, a practice which was disregarded by most of my informants and reinforced feelings of uncertainty and doubt as discussed earlier. Conversely, individual shamans often have Facebook pages and profiles which allow them to establish contacts with wider networks of clients while concentrating on their own private life. This practice has been, for some of my informants, a form of shock, as they described it, given the fact that this type of communication removes the possibility of face-to-face interactions, considered by many of my interlocutors as essential for a successful ritual. Nevertheless, some shamans, like Hovalygmaa, do not find it problematic to conduct rituals via Skype in order to help people living outside of Tuva. As she explained, the internet allows her to expand her practice and reach further. She only needs to see the image of the room and the client's face in order to be able to summon the spirits and undertake adequate negotiations. There is no request for any payment, however voluntary donations are usually made afterwards via bank transfers.

In this way, the introduction of technological media, exemplified in the use of the internet and mobile phones, reveals conflicts and tensions within generations of Tuvans as well as shamanic practitioners themselves. These conflicts are mainly conceptualised through ideas of disturbance and interference, but also, in the context of social media, as shock. On the one hand, technology seems to, according to my informants, restrain their intuitive skills and distinct ways of interacting with their surrounding based on the extensive use of senses. On the other hand, it facilitates networks of communication between clients and shamans and allows them to move their ritual practices beyond the physical borders of Tuva whilst, at the same time, perpetuating business-oriented perceptions of shamanic practice among some of the clientele and deepening the element of distrust between them.

Apart from the internet and cell phones, technological development has been associated by my informants with introducing in Tuva railway and fast moving trains. This plan has always been described by my friends as a kind of shock, similar to the experience of being cursed. This became evident after I met with Olga, one of the students from the University of Kyzyl, who was deeply concerned about the future of her friends and relatives in the wake of rapid technological changes.

One day, Olga and I were walking down the hill near the Yenisei river while discussing her projects, projects dedicated to spreading the importance and meaning of different rituals conducted in pre-Soviet times among the young generation of Tuvans. Olga explained how she felt confused during a variety of ceremonies, such as *shagaa* (the Tuvan New Year which usually takes place in February, depending on the lamas' astrological calculations), which for her constituted an intriguing yet meaningless combination of actions. Like my other informants, she complained about conceptualisations of different rituals solely through the prism of academic debates and theoretical ideals, associated with wider political processes in post-Soviet Siberia. 'We need some propaganda, but among normal people, not at the level of academia or the government', she insisted. 'Look, we had two huge leaps. The first, at the beginning of the Soviet Union. The second we are experiencing right now. We are too slow, we have a different understanding of time and space. Soon enough, we are going to be in reservation camps, while the trains pass by with great speed and we are left confused', she concluded. Indeed, it was common among my informants to think about themselves as somehow trapped between Soviet and post-Soviet times while continuously confronting the uncertainties of everyday existence. The fear of an unknown future was often described through the example of introducing in Kyzyl a railway, a widely debated issue.

The debate referred to the Government's plans to build a railway track from China to Moscow through Kyzyl, plans which, although remaining distant in terms of their actualisation, deeply worry many Tuvans and threaten the stability of their community because of what they seem to entail. As it was explained to me, the idea of fast-moving trains was like a shock or disturbance experienced during instances of cursing. In short, the prospect of introducing fast trains in the near future triggered anxiety and unsettlement through direct connotations with rapid transformations and speed. These transformations included abrupt and unpredictable consequences, similar to the condition of being cursed. Overall, the idea of the fast-moving train was often used by my friends as a way of talking about the diverse uncertainties and challenges associated with life after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

This association between curses, technological development and life in post-Soviet Kyzyl in general can be explored through briefly mentioning the definition of

the term shock. As Schivelbusch explains in his discussion of the industrialisation of time and space in the nineteenth century, the term shock originates from military language and is associated with a 'blow', 'strike' or 'concussion' (1987: 150). In the sixteenth century, it 'denoted the encounter of an armed force with the enemy as well as the encounter of two mounted warriors charging one another' (ibid.: 150). Today, as Schivelbusch writes, 'shock no longer describes any simple blow or strike, but a violent act compound from the concentration of many individual elements. It is a kind of a sudden and powerful event of violence that disrupts the continuity' (ibid.: 157). This, in turn, dovetails with Freud's descriptions of shock and traumatic neurosis, defined as 'an onslaught of stimuli powerful enough to pierce the shield – a traumatic excitation from outside which is powerful enough to break through the protective shield' (ibid.: 166). As discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, although they don't need to be 'psychologised', the mechanics of cursing are also characterised by an abrupt and fast implementation of particularly disturbing energy upon a victim, which constitutes a form of shock, similar to the shock described in these definitions.

Contributing to this point further, in a wonderfully evocative way, one of my informants connected the issue of trains with his experience watching Dziga Vertov's film, *A Man with a Movie Camera* – a famous depiction of revolutionary ideals and Soviet ideology. The way in which the scenes were cut in the film constituted, according to my informant, a good example of what curses could do to people. Interestingly, the crucial premise of montage in early Soviet cinema was the idea of shock. Cinematographers of that time, such as Eisenstein and Vertov, were of the conviction that new ways of seeing and understanding could be achieved by means of disruption and fragmentation, allowing for the implementation and spread of the new ideology (Petric 1992; Dickinson 1982). In other words, it was believed that through the method of shock a new form of revolutionary collective consciousness can be produced. Even though the connections between Soviet cinema and the way life is described by my interlocutors in post-Soviet Kyzyl might appear far-fetched, I believe that my informant's suggestion adds in an intriguing way to the argument about trains as an idiom of the unpredictable future that characterises post-Soviet Kyzyl. It also reinforces the idea that curses, through incorporating the notions of shock and disturbance, illuminate a particular symbiosis with other processes and events and the



ways in which these are experienced. This, in turn, foregrounds the argument that certain characteristics of cursing can become effective analytical tools with which we can ask questions about diverse events occurring beyond the context of occult phenomena – a point to which I shall return in the last part of this chapter.

Taken together, tensions between individual shamans and shamans associated with societies along with shifts in the religious landscape, the development of health problems and introduction of technology illuminate an intensification of diverse challenges and issues triggered by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As presented above, these challenges are often grasped through ideas of conflicts, disturbances, shock and uncertainty much in a similar way to how the experiences of cursing are described. More than that, some issues, such as alcoholism or depression, are directly defined as curse. Given this, the proliferation of diverse problems in post-Soviet Kyzyl, rather than being perceived by my informants as directly triggered by the end of the Soviet regime, is seen as a scene of challenges that are talked about and experienced like curses. In order to illustrate this point further, in the next section I briefly engage with the political and administrative implications of the indigenous status in Russia. I shall illuminate how the perceptions of life in Kyzyl discussed above are reinforced by tensions between Russians and Tuvans and the way Tuvans are seen by Russians.

## **2. The category of indigeneity in Siberia**

Before the Soviet Union, indigenous peoples inhabiting Siberia were classified under two Russian expressions, *tuzemet's* ('from different soil') and *inorodiet's* ('born differently'), which implied the person was neither a foreigner nor a citizen of the country (Sokolovski 2000). In 1822, all Siberian 'tribes', referred to as *yasechnyje* ('paying tribute to Russia'), were split into three different categories: vagrant, settled and nomadic (ibid.: 94). This was established in two separate documents, 'Procedures for Ruling Siberian Aliens' and 'The Status of Alien Administration'. Later on, during the Soviet regime, indigeneity was associated with a general backwardness of social organisation. Interestingly, for over sixty years the Soviets refused to employ the term 'indigenous' in order to facilitate their imperialistic politics. Instead, they used the

term 'small-numbered people' (ibid.). As argued by the Russian government during a session of the UN Indigenous Population Working Group, they introduced the term 'small numbered people' due to the fact that, according to the precise legal definitions of the term 'indigenous', they were no indigenous peoples living in Siberia at the time (ibid.: 110). Nevertheless, indigenous peoples were seen as presenting a challenge to the Soviet authorities. This challenge had to be tackled which required particular policies (ibid.: 108). The Soviets focused on using the local intelligentsia in order to facilitate the process of 'leading their people out of primitiveness and raising them to an acceptable level of civilization and culture' (Donahoe 2011: 415). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term *korennyje narody* started to be used in relation to the inhabitants of Siberia, which translates into English as 'indigenous peoples'. Interestingly, as suggested by Sokolovski (2000: 109), this translation has a certain complexity, as it derives from the Russian word 'root' (*koren'*) and implies spatial stability inconsistent with the movement practices dominant among indigenous Siberian communities.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some indigenous communities began the process of fighting for the status of free citizens, an appreciation of their cultures, the recognition of their ethnic status, and fairer resource distribution or land ownership (ibid.). This, in turn, required an official confirmation of indigenous status. As a result, what once was associated with backwardness has now become the only way to reestablish sociocultural roots in the new political landscape. Nevertheless, most indigenous communities underwent, despite diverse efforts, the process of Russification (Grant 1995), preserving none or only some of their pre-Soviet practices. Within this group, Tuvans constitute an unusual community, which perhaps due to its remote geographical location and difficult accessibility has remained in a challenging state. As explained by my informants, some of the pre-Soviet elements, such as shamanic practice or mobility patterns, persisted on the margins of Sovietisation and today they continue to clash with different ways of life that prevail in post-Soviet times, such as the rules of the free market economy. This state of conflict, rather than reflecting any kind of 'assimilation', is further reinforced, I have noticed, through comments often made about Tuvans by Russians and the way Russians perceive Tuvans as inferior. For instance, in diverse discussions I had with my Russian

informants, Tuvans were always described as some type of outsiders, who are neither Russian nor ‘fully indigenous’.

Before I visited Tuva for the first time, I stayed with two Russian families for a few days in Abakan, a city in Khakassia. They were very interested in my trip but remained confused by the city in which I wanted to do my research. Tensions between Russians and Tuvans were a recurring subject in our discussions. My friends in Abakan were not interested in Tuvan culture and spoke of it with either fear or confusion. Moreover, Tuvans were continuously criticised for their lack of involvement in different projects, including the production of industrial goods which, according to my Russian informants, signified Tuvans’ inability to become fully Russian. As one of my Russian hosts put it, there was not much to say about the Tuvans as they could not even produce anything useful, for instance cars or window frames. Moreover, given difficult encounters at the beginning of the 90s, visits to Tuva have been often perceived by Russian as involving violence and extreme criminality. Many times, I have been told by my Russian informants that they would fear to stay overnight in Kyzyl due to the behaviour of Kyzylians, which seemed as dangerously unpredictable. More than that, even my Kyzylian friends expressed concerns about wandering at night around the city, frequently claiming that humans, spirits, and forces can move uncontrollably during this time of the day. In this way an overall atmosphere of disturbance and uncertainty has been attributed to the capital, perpetuated by Russian images of Kyzyl as the most criminal city in Siberia and perceptions of Tuvans as ‘unfitting’ or ‘on the edge’ of Russia. These tensions have only reinforced the problematic status of indigeneity and indigenous peoples as expressed in the complex history of Siberia and contributed to my informants’ ideas about living in Kyzyl as unstable and disturbing.

Concluding my discussion on the symbiosis between curses and life in the city, in the final section of this chapter I show how diverse challenges arising in the capital cannot be effectively grasped through the analytical frameworks of cultural or ethnic revivalism, the frameworks usually employed in the studies of post-colonial and, in particular, post-Soviet realms and their dynamics. Instead, using my informants’ descriptions, I propose to employ the mechanics of curse as a methodological tool with which we can ask questions and understand the complexities of post-Soviet life in a

more 'authentic' fashion.

### **3. On the idea of 'cultural revivalism'**

In the context of Siberia, diverse processes occurring in the post-Soviet realm, in particular 'resurgence' of shamanic practice, have been grasped through the concept of cultural revivalism (Balzer 2002, 2005, 2008; Vitebsky 2003; Grant 1995; Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Lindquist 2005). Within these studies, shamanising has been discussed as a technique for dealing with calamities and the uncertainty of the post-Soviet realm; as a way of restoring the connections between the 'old' and the 'new' (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Lindquist 2005). It has also been approached through reconstructing values assumed to have been lost during the Soviet times through re-establishing interactions with spirits (Buyandelgeriyn 2007); re-discovering 'tradition' (Pimienova 2013); and reviving, through institutionalisation of shamanic practice, indigenous identities and ethnicity (Balzer 2005, 2008; Pimienova 2013; Vitebsky 2003; Shimamura 2004). In Tuva in the wake of Soviet disintegration, there has been a strong trend towards the revitalisation of pre-Soviet practices, mainly through establishing of shamanic societies instigated by the Tuvan intelligentsia along with the local government (Pimienova 2013; Lindquist 2005; Zorbas 2013). In this way, Tuvan shamans have been equipped with a new political role as the leaders of revivalism and the emblems of 'tradition' (Balzer 2005).

The notion of cultural revivalism, with particular focus on transformations within the shamanic landscape, foregrounds theoretical frameworks which concentrate on the concept of invention. In the Introduction to the study *The Invention of Tradition* (2012), Hobsbawm defines 'invented traditions' as 'a set of practices or responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations' (ibid.: 2). Comaroff and Comaroff approach the proliferation of mystical arts in 'modern' realms as a process of 'retooling culturally familiar technologies as new means for new ends' (1999: 284). In contrast to this, Linnekin (1992) argues that most indigenous traditions are, in fact, (re)invented, in order to make sense of or deal with postcolonial and 'modernised' realities, whilst Briggs implies that the process of cultural revivalism as

‘making’ tradition constitutes a creation of new cultural forms which, declared as ‘factitious’, become for local communities a part of their lived experience (1996: 438). Conversely, Marshall Sahlins proposes to focus, rather than on ‘invention of tradition’, on the ‘inventiveness of tradition’, which he defines as the ‘permutation of older forms and relationships which enter into entrepreneurial projects because of their meanings, associations and relationships in history and the culture’ (1999: 408).

The efficiency of these analytical frameworks, however, remains problematic in the context of post-Soviet Kyzyl. Diverse processes occurring in Kyzyl, including frictions amongst shamans and other ‘religious’ practitioners and technological development, have never been associated by my informants with the idea of ‘Tuvan-ness’ or any forms of identity. More than that, in their discussions my interlocutors rarely referred to terms like ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ or the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. Instead, they would emphasise the elements that were pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet. Thus, the perception of shamanic practice as a political tool and a symbol of identity, although successful in the academic and international arenas, within the sphere of everyday life constituted an unusual arrangement and a subversion of the conceptualisations of shamanic practice as usually understood. More than that, the exacerbation of challenges in Kyzyl has always been grasped by my informants as characterised by conflict, disturbance and uncertainty. This, in turn, does not point to any forms of creation or invention that can be otherwise effectively identified in the context of Tuvan intelligentsia and academia.

Thus, I believe that frameworks of ‘cultural revivalism’ or ‘invention of tradition’ are analytically ineffective in the study of everyday life and its intricacies in post-Soviet Kyzyl. Instead, I propose viewing them through the lens of conflict, shock, and disturbance which create a kind of uncontrolled turbulence characteristic of the mechanics of cursing. Following Bubandt’s analysis of witchcraft as a condition of doubt (2014), I suggest that by focusing on disturbance, shock, and uncertainty, the study of the mechanics of cursing ‘may approach anew the curious symbiosis’ (ibid.: 241) between the experience of curses and the experience of living in post-Soviet Kyzyl. References to idioms of trains or montage, along with particular perceptions of life in the city through the lens of curse, illuminate the ‘synergy’ of occult phenomena with other occurrences in the fabric of everyday world, not confined to specific

cosmologies or even ontological settings. Thus, cursing becomes a form of methodological tool with which we can ask questions about challenges taking place in the arena of Kyzyl without reducing them to the usual concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. More than that, thinking about the mechanics of curse as a method of inquiry emancipates the idea of cursing and occult phenomena in general from their foregrounded readings as ‘a presumed belief’ (ibid.) fulfilling ‘meaning-generating functions’ (ibid.). Taken together, exploring the mechanics of cursing in the ethnographic context of Tuva as an experience and as a method allows us to better understand the complexity of everyday life in Kyzyl, without limiting it to the already exhausted dynamics of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’.

## **Conclusion**

In the wake of the Soviet dissolution, Kyzyl has become a platform upon which the diverse elements of everyday life combine and re-combine, producing conflicts and tensions. The intensification of these dynamics brought about by shifts in political and economic systems is grasped by my friends and informants through ideas of conflicts and disturbances as well as shock and uncertainty that together produce a kind of uncontrolled turbulence. In this way, what happens in Kyzyl is experienced and talked about in a same way that curses are described and felt. In order to illustrate this, in this chapter I have focused on tensions within the shamanic landscape as well as wider conflicts amongst ‘religious’ practitioners. I have engaged with the problems of alcoholism and other diseases and technological development reflected in ideas of cell phones, the internet, and fast-moving trains. Rather than exploring the fabric of everyday life in Kyzyl through the frameworks of ‘cultural revivalism’ or ‘invention of tradition’ I have suggested to look at the challenges mentioned by my informants as a curse. In other words, instead of engaging with cursing as a form of ‘modernity’ (Geshiere 1997; Smith 2008; Ashforth 2005; Pels 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) or as embedded in ‘traditional’ epistemologies (Vidal and Whitehead 2004; Moore and Sanders 2001), I have argued that life in Kyzyl is like curses. Thus, cursing may be employed as a methodological tool with which we can more effectively grasp the dynamics of a post-Soviet city. More than that, the application of such a framework

pushes the analytical focus from the symbolic and functional readings of occultism to the mechanics of occult phenomena – the key subject of analysis in this thesis.





## Conclusion

My last interview in Kyzyl took place a few hours before I left Tuva. I wanted to clarify some of the information I had been given regarding Tuvan funerals. Only a few days before, one of my close friends and informants had participated in a forty-nine-day long ritual, and had agreed to speak to me about it. We sat down on a bench in the park and, while looking at the steppe and the Yenisei river, Alexandr shared with me his experience. The ritual was successful and ended without any unexpected occurrences. The *sünezin* of the deceased, who was a famous throat singer, had a few final things to share with his relatives before departing from this life and being reborn. He was primarily focused on whom should inherit his musical instruments. However, he also had a special warning for one of the members of the audience. As the shaman revealed, it concerned the possibility of being cursed and, as a result, the relative was told to avoid riding a bicycle. I asked my friend whether there were any clues about who could be inflicting the curse, but he said there was nothing. I wanted to know what would happen if the relative tried to leave Tuva. ‘Curses would still be with you. You can carry them across very long distances. The only way to get rid of them is to come back here and meet with a shaman’, he explained. In that moment, I could not help but wonder what kind of cursing energies I would be taking back home with me the next day.

## Shamans and curses

This thesis started out with Shonchalgalj’s story about an inexplicable array of illnesses which turned out to be a consequence of a powerful curse inflicted by her colleague. We saw, how Shonchalgalj struggled to find the cause of her suffering while seeking advice from different practitioners, including medical doctors, a lama, and, finally, a shaman. It was only the latter that could recognise the source of affliction and ensure its permanent removal. The example of Shonchalgalj was followed by the stories

of, among others, Katija the policewoman, Ajdyn the taxi driver and a German language teacher Orzju. All of these cases illustrated how in post-Soviet Kyzyl cursing continuously proliferates while infiltrating diverse spheres of everyday life, including kin, economic, and political relations. I have argued that instances of Tuvan curses (*kargysh-chatka*), although deeply embedded in shifts within the socioeconomic and political landscape, should not be reduced to them. Despite echoing some of the ideas associated with the concept of ‘occult economies’, which emphasises the understandings of economy as grounded in acquisition of wealth and power, I have shown how cursing in Kyzyl shapes and reflects wider sociocosmic dynamics, emergent from human and non-human interactions.

In so doing, I tried to go beyond discursive approaches to occult phenomena and focus on the actual mechanics of cursing while conceptualising the instances of curse infliction and deflection as autonomous social actions, operating within the fabric of everyday life in post-Soviet Kyzyl – a life characterised by instability and unpredictability. This process was exemplified in the way my friends and informants used curses almost as a kind of survival technique which allowed them to maintain some degree of agency over their otherwise deeply unpredictable and uncertain existence in the city. More than that, I have argued that the increasingly challenging life in post-Soviet Kyzyl pertained not only to humans but to spirits too – in this way, I suggested cursing goes well beyond particular everyday problems and becomes an all-encompassing sociocosmic event.

Focusing on the mechanics of cursing, including individual experiences of being cursed, I have shown how curses are perceived as distinct energies which constitute an integral element of a wider network of fluctuating forces including, for instance, misfortune and good luck. The perpetual flow of these energies from spirits to humans and humans to other humans, as I have argued, is what underpins and characterises interactions between different kinds of persons in Tuvan ontology. While emphasising the dynamics within family, economic, and political spheres in Kyzyl today in contrast to pre-Soviet and Soviet times, I have proposed that the proliferation of cursing phenomena in the city is contingent on the intensification of the flow of these energies through the closeness brought about by the move to the city, rather than the emergence of the capitalist market itself. In this way, I have shown how curses

remain embedded in tensions and conflicts that have always been there, but stayed dormant or better controlled throughout the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods, only to be unveiled and intensified through the abrupt end of the Soviet regime. In this way, I have illuminated how cursing does not represent a direct response to post-Soviet calamities, but remains situated in wider historical and sociocosmological processes.

This thesis has simultaneously shown how the mechanics of cursing are intrinsically intertwined with and, to a great extent, contingent on shamanic practice. The story of Hovalygmaa, a powerful representative of a long line of shamans in Tuva, has illustrated how the process of cursing, including curse infliction and deflection rituals, can rarely occur without the attendance of an experienced shaman. Following Hovalygmaa in her daily practices has allowed me to foreground a wider discussion of the characteristics of shamanic practice and its efficacy in this thesis. As I have emphasised, rather than becoming vessels for spirits or travelling to other worlds, Tuvan shamans are considered as distinct artisans whose work is contingent on often lengthy and dramatic negotiations with spirits, conducted through and embedded in diverse articulations of sounds. This was most clearly shown through my discussion of the death curse and the way Hovalygmaa was forced not only to confront the spirit responsible for curse infliction, but also had to convince the other spirits to assist her in the processes of deflecting it. As we have seen, this involved a variety of sounds, such as soothing humming, abrupt screams, and laughter, which resulted in a diverse set of reactions from the audience, ranging from crying to jumping anxiously.

Articulating the efficacy of shamanic practice as embedded in and contingent on sound, I have also shown how shamanic skills arise from a wider ability to see and hear what usually cannot be seen or heard, expressed as in the Tuvan language as *bürülbaazyn* ('hear and see what cannot be heard or seen'). As illustrated by my informants through diverse stories concerned with dreams, visions, and sudden spirit encounters, this ability pertains to laymen too. Nevertheless, in the post-Soviet realm it remains cultivated only by shamans due to fears of political and social persecutions. The concept of *bürülbaazyn*, essential to shamanic practice, has illuminated how shamans produce a form of experiential knowledge which reveals distinct 'flowing' features, for example, evading any forms of codification or unification. This was evident in Hovalygmaa's experience and her tendency to forget the content of rituals,

as well as her continuous refusal to put in writing the chants she performed. In this way, in line with anthropological perceptions of shamanism as a mode of doing, I have shown how knowledge production in Tuvan shamanic practice reinforces the ideas of movement and fluidity discussed in this thesis in relation to cursing and its proliferation in post-Soviet Tuva.

Focusing on the characteristics of Tuvan shamanic work, this thesis has also contributed to a re-consideration of the significance of trance, which is usually seen as involving significant changes in the physical and psychic states of the shamans. Instead, I have shown how this kind of trance is absent from Tuvan imagery and how communication with spirits is rather embedded in creative production of sounds, something that does not need or imply a loss of consciousness. More than that, concentrating on the terms, such as ‘black’ and ‘white’ (shamans) as well as ‘evil’ (spirits), I have shown how these terms have ontic rather than moral implications. Thus, instead of demonstrating what things should or should not be they differentiate what they are and what they are not. Along these lines, I have illuminated how the processes of curse infliction and deflection constitute different ways of reconfiguring aspects of the cosmos that go beyond mere curing or harming strategies. Thus, this thesis has contributed to a better understanding of ‘dark shamanism’ too as something that complements its ‘white’ counterpart rather than finding itself opposed to it.

### **Turbulence and beyond**

This thesis has also been concerned with the idea of turbulence as an intrinsic element of curses as well as other aspects of life in Tuva. Exploring the notion of turbulence, I have argued that the Tuvan cosmos does not reflect a fixed and clearly ordered structure, composed of wholes and parts neatly tied together and subjected to eternal laws (Mikkelsen 2016: 202). Rather, it is always fragile and subjected to (re)configurations while being pervaded by tensions emerging from interactions between humans and non-humans. This was evident in the way that experiences of curses were described by my friends and informants as conflicts – conflicts that entail humans and spirits and produce uncontrolled turbulence. I have also emphasised how such turbulence pertains to the rituals which are dedicated to curse deflection or

infliction, and reverberates within wider patterns of being in Tuva, such as sound and language. In this way, I have argued that turbulence, although qualitatively different in each of these contexts (semi-controlled or uncontrolled), constitutes one of the key notions that characterise Tuvan ontology.

Developing this argument, the focus of this thesis turned to the client and individual experiences of being cursed. Along these lines, I have discussed the conceptualisation of human personhood in Tuva and the process of its (de)formation in the presence of curses. Analysing the difference between humans and other kinds of persons, such as spirits and animals in the wider context of animistic ontologies, I have shown how human personhood is characterised by a concentric structure, where multiple layers remain interconnected through a centre, *sünezin*. This was evident in the way that Hovalygmaa compared humans to a tree trunk and discussed the process of shaping human personhood through the lens of growing and dying trees. I have also presented how the experience of being cursed constitutes a particular condition in which curses disturb the concentric structure of humans and introduce the notion of turbulence transforming victims into turbulent beings. I have illustrated this with different examples in which my informants described sudden changes in their behaviour, such as an abrupt flair for drinking or aggression, and compared them to erratic, unpredictable waves which are described as ‘swirls’ (*ezinneldir*) and ‘whirls’ (*duvulendir*). The ethnographic case of the policewoman Katija also illuminated the importance of materialised images of curses, often presented in the shamanic descriptions of deformed bodies as embodiments of sociocosmic conflict. This reflected the way in which bodies, in the context of curses, constitute dynamic trajectories through which the world is encountered, learned, and experienced (Latour 2004).

Discussing the differences between human and other types of personhood, this thesis has contributed to wider anthropological studies of animism in the context of Amerindian, Siberian, and Southeast Asian ontologies. While focusing on the fluidity of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ in Tuva, I have recognised the importance of influences from other religions, in particular Buddhism, as well as stressed the significance of fortune and interactions with spirits in the process of shaping human personhood. I have only briefly engaged with the efficacy of perspectivism in the ethnographic context of Tuva,

leaving it for future exploration. I have also not fully answered the question of spirit possession while analysing cursing experiences which, despite its problematic use in relation to Tuvans, requires further investigation.

Exploring the notion of turbulence, I have shown how it extends beyond the immediate experiences of curses and prevails in other spheres of everyday life in Tuva. I have illuminated how it is used in descriptions of things and events that can change suddenly and abruptly, how it echoes in travelling patterns and lexicon and, finally, how it remains central to the production of sounds. The intertwining of sound and turbulence has had particular implications for the analysis of curses and shamanic practice in the second part of this thesis. Thus, we have seen how the sound of the drum constitutes an indispensable element of shamanic practice while producing a particular kind of semi-controlled turbulence within which the cosmos (un)folds incessantly. I have argued that this process is indispensable in order to discompose the old cosmic configurations and confront things while establishing new arrangements in a form of curse infliction or deflection. More than that, I have shown how the organisational structure of the ritual stemming from turbulence triggered by the drum is characterised by the elements of fluidity and unpredictability. In other words, as illustrated in the story of the taxi driver Ajdyn and his experience of death curse, events occurring during the ritual might take an abrupt and unpredictable turn. This was analytically explored through a comparison between sound structure in classical music and throat singing while drawing parallels between the organisation of events in liturgical order and shamanic rituals. In both of these comparisons, the elements of turbulence and fluidity were contrasted with invariance and stable patterns of events.

Through focusing on the characteristic of rituals involving curses, this thesis has also contributed to the studies of shamanic drums. Moving beyond the perceptions of drums as symbolic or therapeutic tools, I have shown how in Tuva they constitute a central element of the ritual proceedings. Initiating the event, they shape the ritual in a particular centripetal structure which bounds up shamans, spirits and the audience in an interdependent fashion.

Following the discussion on the role of sound in shamanic rituals, I have shown how shamans, while operating within the turbulence produced by the drum, confront it through (re)arranging things afresh and establishing new configurations using the

sounds produced by their voice. In the case of Ajdyn, we saw how the shaman deployed a variety of sounds, the production of which had essential implications for both the audience and the spirits. Further, the ethnographic example of Ajdyn illuminated how, rather than the meaning of the words, it is the way they sound that allows for negotiations with spirits and produces particular responses in the audience. This became evident in the intersection of Ajdyn's reactions and the shaman's voice which showed how, through manipulating sounds, shamans establish the material presence of spirits, a presence that can be felt by the audience via diverse senses. Thus, I have argued that while constituting the essential element of cursing rituals, sounds in Tuvan shamanism are imbued with a potency of their own while actualising the presence of spirits. Along these lines, I have shown how the reputation of the shaman is contingent on the ability to allow the client to interact with spirits through smell, touch, or vision. This was evident in the way that my informants emphasised the fact that a good shaman is the one that can show them something. Along these lines, this thesis has contributed to anthropological studies concerned with (im)materiality of sound as well as the importance of sounds and words in shamanic practice in general.

Having established and illustrated the mechanics of cursing as embedded in disturbance, shock, and uncertainty, I have argued that life in post-Soviet Kyzyl is like the experience of curses. This was illustrated in the way my friends and informants described how diverse processes, such as tensions within shamanic and other religious landscapes, the spread of alcoholism, and rapid technological development, are perceived in a similar way to how curses are perceived. Drawing thus on depictions of the city as characterised by conflicts, disturbance, shock and unpredictability, I have proposed that what happens in Kyzyl can be compared to curses and the idea of uncontrolled turbulence, the same kind of turbulence I have discussed with regard to cursing. In my analysis, I have not fully answered the questions about the future and associated with it notion of hope or its absence, which require further exploration. Rather, I have discussed the inefficiency of analytical frameworks, such as 'cultural revivalism', in the context of Tuva. This was best expressed in the fact that my informants did not associate any of the transformations occurring in Kyzyl with the ideas of identity or 'Tuvan-ness', ideas which remain central to these frameworks.

Following on from that, I have suggested that the mechanics of cursing can be used as a methodological tool with which we could ask questions about diverse processes occurring in post-colonial realms. In this way, I have proposed to go beyond the functional and symbolic readings of occult practices that grasp them either as a kind of 'modernity' or a 'traditional' concept reflecting responses to 'modern' change. Thus, this thesis has contributed to anthropological studies concerned with diverse processes occurring in post-colonial realms while emphasising the exhaustion of certain analytical ideas, such as the intertwining of the 'old' and the 'new' or 'tradition' and 'modernity', ideas we should leave behind.

### **The final encounter**

I spent the last night of my fieldwork in the basement of the Tuvan Cultural Center with some foreigners who arrived in Kyzyl in order to improve their throat singing skills. While falling asleep, I was listening to them practicing, the sound of which constantly intertwined with some distant Tuvan voices. These were the concluding sounds that accompanied the end of my yearly adventure. At five in the morning, I walked to the bus station, crossing the empty streets of the city. As the bus rode through the steppe, I noticed the hill where Hovalygmaa and her family had their *ovaa*. We had visited this place only a few weeks earlier. I discreetly waved to it, saying in this way a kind of symbolic goodbye to the city and my friends who live in it. As we reached the Sayan mountains, I turned my head and saw how the vast open space with the famous road leading to Kyzyl was disappearing behind me. Soon after, we were driving smoothly through Khakassia, where I met my Russian friends. A day later, I reached Moscow and, before I knew it, I was at Heathrow airport. While waiting for my flight to Edinburgh, I watched an Italian woman arguing angrily with, as I assumed, her partner, about something she clearly struggled to find in her bag. The woman was waving her hands uncontrollably and constantly raising her voice while the man tried to calm her down with an apologetic tone and polite smiles. All of a sudden, curses and Kyzyl did not seem that distant any more.



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